Transatlantic Enlightenment
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Transatlantic Enlightenment

Peter Gay and the Drama of German History in the
United States, 1930s-1970s

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIJT

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prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex
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# Table of Contents:

**Preface**  
6

**Introduction: An Émigré’s Reinvention of the West**  
Weimar in America  
14  
Weimar: Nothing New  
15  
Cold War Ties  
19  
Approach  
21  
Organization  
23

**Chapter I: Evaluating Exile**  
Introduction  
26  
The German-Jewish Past  
27  
Emigration  
31  
American Exile  
34  
The Past in the Present  
40  
Germany in the West  
47  
A Moderate Liberal  
56  
A German-American Perspective  
60

**Chapter II: American “Lessons” from German History**  
Introduction  
64  
Theoretical Explorations  
67  
The Crisis of Western Culture  
70  
Bernstein Introduced  
73  
Morality and Power  
76  
A Liberal Narrative?  
80  
American Culture as a Battlefield  
89  
Émigré and American Disillusionment  
91  
Constructing American Exceptionalism  
98  
A Loss of Faith in History  
101  
Searching for a Center in the Cold War  
105

**Chapter III: Lies and Enlightenment**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter IV: Reinventing Weimar in the Sixties</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting the Stage</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Activism</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weimar and the West</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weimar's Light and Darkness</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Responsibility of Weimar Intellectuals</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After <em>Weimar Culture</em></td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay’s Style</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition of Popularizers</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay in the Light of the Sixties</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter V: Between Memory and History</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Those Who Lived”</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German-Jewish Symbiosis</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Psychology of Anti-Semitism</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay in Israel</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits to Germany</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyewitness of the German Past</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Mistrust</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Nolte Controversy</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between <em>Bildung</em> and the Holocaust</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychoanalysis and Memory</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Good Boy</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Anti-Semitism</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Memory</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion:  The Achievements of Acculturation  254
1. Germany and the United States  257
2. Ideas and Ideology  260
3. Trauma and Reinvention  264

Bibliography  269

Summary  292

Nederlandse samenvatting  299
Preface

My dissertation on the impact of the historian Peter Gay’s experience of emigration on his scholarship has been animated by my meetings with the historian himself, who passed away in June 2015. I first met Gay during a memorial of his wife, the historian of Jewish history Ruth Gay, at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York in 2008. After I introduced myself, he exclaimed: “Leeman, that’s a beautiful German name!” “No, no!”, I too quickly responded, “I’m not German, I’m Dutch!” “Well”, Gay answered, “I wouldn’t have hold it against you.” Then I told him about my research project. Gay immediately advised me to look at his personal papers, which were archived at Columbia University and had never been examined. After that first meeting, I have talked to him for hours during my year as a visiting scholar at Columbia. The deal was that I would bring him a tuna sandwich, his favorite, after which I could ask him about my findings in the archive.

Although Gay had tried to structure European history during his impressive historical career, his own life turned out to be stored in more than forty, disorganized and partly unprocessed moving boxes at Columbia’s Rare Books and Manuscripts Room. Some of the boxes that I had looked at on earlier occasions, could not be found during one of my next visits. The boxes I opened contained a large variety of student papers, personal and professional correspondence, lectures, drafts of books that were never realized and diaries, which no one had looked at before. In 1970 the historian had pursued his career at Yale University, but his decision to give his papers to Columbia is not without significance. Having escaped the Nazis, he was soon confronted with the complexities of American society, like segregation and McCarthyism. After his disruptive experiences of the 1968 student protests he left the university to continue his career at Yale University. Still, he continued to perceive New York as the epicenter of the cosmopolitan America that he had come to embrace.

My sessions with Gay took place at his New York home, close to the university, where he lived alone since his wife had passed away three years earlier. At the time, he was still in relatively good physical health. Of course, the historian himself, admired for his vast knowledge of European
history and culture, often complained about his memory when he couldn’t remember an event or date. For sure, it must have been confusing to discuss the fragments of his past I confronted him with. After my day in the archive we often talked about a broad variety of subjects such as German history, his friendship with Richard Hofstadter and his views on the latest baseball game. I thought that his memory was quite impressive. In the course of our meetings, I did notice that his memory about topics like the student protests or his attitudes towards Vietnam was less coherent. Other subjects like the battle against McCarthyism and his first impressions of the United States were more vividly remembered. We also talked about his youth in Nazi Germany. In 1997 he had published his memoirs *My German Question*, which, as is often the case, had become a format for many of his memories.

Luckily, we had the time; on some days Gay remembered different and other things than on other days. We ate our sandwiches and talked about his support for Hillary Clinton (not Obama) during the elections for the Democratic candidacy. His attachment to European art was reflected in the interior of his apartment; modernist lithographs hang next to paintings in the tradition of seventeenth-century Dutch art. A substantial space was taken up by the grand black piano that his wife used to play. Gay even allowed me to stay in his second apartment on the ground floor, which used to be his study room. Surrounded by books on the Enlightenment, Freud, German and German-Jewish history, the bourgeoisie and many other subjects, there was a small double-bed where I could soundly sleep. I am deeply thankful for his kindness and help.

In the first place I would like to thank my professor Frits Boterman, who has often allowed me to go my own way, for example when I decided to start focusing on the American context in which Gay’s scholarship for an important part developed. I highly appreciate his tolerance and patience at times when “my own way” was less productive. I often felt that we share the intensity with which we study the questions of the German past. My co-promoter, professor Volker Berghahn has also been an invaluable mentor. I first met Volker during my year as a visiting scholar at Columbia University. Volker has provided me with many contacts and material. He has read all my chapters twice and gave me with many useful comments. Volker’s encouragement has sustained me during my writing.
My colleagues at the University of Amsterdam have been essential for my well-being in an academic environment. I would especially like to thank the still expanding “462” group: Merel Klein, Mart Rutjes, Bram Mellink, Joris Oddens, Erik Jacobs, Ivo Nieuwenhuis, Eleà de la Porte and Leonard Hul. Over the years, these colleagues and friends have kept me company, in whatever country or state of mind I was.

The cooperation of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Columbia University and the Leo Baeck Institute in New York have shaped this research. During many conferences and research trips I have discussed my project with many American historians of German history, who enlarged my sensibility to my subject. I would especially like to mention Marion Kaplan, Andreas Daum, Marion Deshmukh, Jeffrey Herf, David Sorkin, Jerry Z. Muller and Jim Steakley. I have very much enjoyed the useful conversations with Martin Jay, Maarten Brands and John Tortorice, who kindly allowed me to stay in his house in Madison, and helped me wherever he could. Above all, I would like to thank three historians who were, like Gay, members of the second generation of German-American émigrés: Walter Laqueur, Renate Bridenthal and Fritz Stern. I have talked to them for hours, and they were very willing to answer all my questions about their own experiences and their perceptions of Gay’s scholarship.

Without my parents Wouter en Adeline Leeman-Koppius, I would have written a different dissertation. I hope that this project reflects their creativity and their boundless care. The birth of my daughter Emilia 2,5 years ago, has taught me to care more but, above all, effortlessly. Finally, our two book projects have often put Olivier and me in very different worlds—also in a literal sense. Luckily we both like the words that connect them. His love, independence and criticism helped me to complete this dissertation.
Introduction:

An Émigré’s Reinvention of the West

In 1976, the Jewish German-American historian Peter Gay (1923-2015) felt that the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was a perfect occasion to “lapse into autobiography”. One sunny day in the 1950s, Gay was sitting on the beach with a few good friends, such as the Americanist Richard Hofstadter, and some acquaintances: chatting, sunbathing and swimming. At one point, an American sociologist from Princeton “got up, surveyed the drowsy, cheerful scene, and intoned in his euphoria: ‘Goyim go home!’ It was a self-isolating word that made islands of Jews hostile to the surrounding world, a word that my father had taught me to detest. I got up and walked away.” Only much later, when his irritation had subsided, Gay wondered about the significance of the scene. He concluded that, unlike the sociologist, he had “unpacked his suitcase” after his emigration to the United States, more than thirty-five years earlier: “I was at home in America, because I had been at home in Germany.”

Although the Nazis had expelled him in 1938, Gay evoked a German-American home in exile.

It was mainly Gay himself who helped to furnish his own home. The historian became one of the most widely read advocates of a transatlantic West, since 1946 at Columbia University and in 1969 as a Professor of Comparative and European Intellectual History at Yale University. This dissertation is the first research to explore the connections between Gay’s experience of emigration from Nazi Germany to the United States and his defense of western culture.

George Mosse (1918-1999), Walter Laqueur (b. 1923) and Fritz Stern (1926-2016), he belonged to the so-called second generation of émigré historians\(^3\), who emigrated from Nazi Germany to the United States when they were still in their teens or young adults. With one foot in each country, these émigrés in many ways embodied the complexities and challenges of the postwar transatlantic relationship. After the Second World War the European-American relationship was established more firmly than ever before.\(^4\) But decades of American isolationism and the rise of National Socialism had interrupted the postwar transatlantic dialogue, questioning the intellectual foundations of the West. In the United States intellectuals grappled with the legacy of the experience of the war. While its new international status as superpower demanded a re-definition of its national identity, polarizations between ideological “European” culture and democratic “American” culture coincided with a widespread pessimism about western liberalism. In the middle of these polarizations émigrés such as Gay took on the role as transatlantic mediators between European and American historical narratives, ideas and cultural traditions. Therefore, the central concern of this dissertation involves the question how Gay’s experiences in two countries, his position as historian and his memory of the Third Reich shaped his defense of a transatlantic western culture in his work. Émigrés like Stern have often suggested these ties between life and work, referring to “the drama that was an essential part of our seemingly sedate, scholarly story”.\(^5\) Peter Gordon noted that German émigrés, armed with historical experience of war and ideology, collectively helped to create an entire field of intellectual history organized around their interpretations of the postwar significance of Nazism.\(^6\)

\(^3\) Heinz Wolff is the first historian who examined the second generation of émigré historians in his book Deutsch-Jüdische Emigrationshistoriker in den USA und der Nationalsozialismus (Bern, 1988).


Although scholars of the intellectual emigration from Nazi Germany have often overlooked this second generation of German émigré historians, many of their works are still part of the core curriculum at universities, shaping American views of the European past in important ways. According to Steven Aschheim, Gay, together with fellow second-generation historians Mosse, Stern and Laqueur “virtually reinvented German cultural and intellectual history in the 1960s”. Yet the second generation was a diverse cohort. While historians such as Mosse and Stern decided to dig deeper into the nature of German “irrationality”, Gay largely established his historical career as one of the most well-known supporters of the Enlightenment. After his dissertation on the German socialist Eduard Bernstein, which was published in 1952, his first book on the subject, Voltaire’s Politics: the Poet as Realist (1959) compelled the eminent Enlightenment historian Alfred Cobban to note: “The Enlightenment, then, though certainly out of tune with our black mood and self-indulgent despair, was far less superficial and far less ridiculous than its posthumous reputation would lead us to assume.”

Although twentieth-century catastrophe seemed to render a cheerful approach to the eighteenth-century philosophes’ values like rationality, secularism and freedom doubtful, Gay advocated the view that the Enlightenment was the triumphant birth of western culture. This view found much critical acclaim. Cobban predicted the lasting impact of his colleague’s perspective: “Gay’s views will undoubtedly penetrate into general histories in some thirty years’ time.” Others agreed, noting that Gay’s “magisterial survey [...] has loomed large over the field of Enlightenment Studies”. Recently, there’s been a re-appreciation of Gay’s work on the Enlightenment, after decades of more mixed views. His “sweeping panorama of Western intellectual history” transcended ordinary accounts of the West: it was an attempt to evoke its spirit.

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However, the huge ambitions of Gay’s evocation of the western “spirit” confronted interpreters of his work with significant problems. Specialists found it often hard to grasp its diversity and complexity. After his work on the Enlightenment Gay moved on to the examination of subjects like Weimar culture, German-Jewish history, modernism, Freud and the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{14} Helmut Walser Smith noted that “in these subjects, there is hardly a historian who has not grappled with Gay’s writings”.\textsuperscript{15} His international focus embraced three centuries, from the eighteenth to the twentieth, and crossed as many disciplinary borders; he related social, intellectual and cultural history, while his writings became more and more inspired by psychoanalysis. For seven years in the 1970s, he was trained –an abomination to many of his colleagues– at a psychoanalytical institute in New Haven, although “psychohistory” was a term that he himself did not like to use. Loyal to the Freudian axiom that individuals are often strikingly unaware of their identity, Gay referred to the significance of his own experiences and work only in the most ambivalent terms. In his acceptance speech of the National Book Award, which he received for his synthesis \textit{The Enlightenment: An Interpretation} in 1972, he observed:

“the occasion gives me a forum for a matter that has long preoccupied me: the relation between writing and propaganda. … If I have polemicized on behalf of the Enlightenment –and I have, extensively– I have done so because I believe that since the Romantics the movement has been misread and misrepresented. It may be that my desire to discover the truth about the Enlightenment was strengthened by my enthusiasm for its secularism and political radicalism. But that is a question for my biographer.”\textsuperscript{16}

Gay’s polemical tone in scholarly debates went together with a deep sense of historical complexity that was informed by his intimate knowledge of German and American intellectual and cultural


\textsuperscript{16} Gay, “Acceptance speech of the National Book Award”; Peter Gay Papers; MS#0474; Box 17.1; Unprocessed, Rare Books and Manuscripts Room, Columbia University.
traditions. The polarized context in which he embarked on his career, just after the Second World War, at the beginning of the Cold War, generated radically different interpretations of his perspective on western culture.

**Weimar in America**

Scholars tend to get lost in the labyrinth of European and American ideas and experiences that infused Gay’s work. The diversity of the criticism that he received can partly be attributed to second-generation émigrés’ often opaque position between two cultures. This dissertation questions two interpretations in prevailing historiography on his life and work. Some scholars perceive his work as the product of Weimar’s celebrated culture, which often led to a neglect of his generation’s particular experiences of emigration. Others connect his support of western culture too exclusively to a Cold War context. Both approaches frequently involve views on his scholarship as the product of his repression of his experiences with anti-Semitism and his artificial acculturation into American culture.

The very first accounts of the intellectual emigration from Nazi Germany since the 1930s frequently celebrated the German-American encounter. The reception of the exchange between German and American intellectual and cultural traditions was marked by a tone of “pious optimism”; émigrés represented the “good Germany” and their successful integration into American academia reflected the promise of the postwar transatlantic alliance. Stern, Gay’s colleague at Columbia for fourteen years, agreed that “the encounter between American and German learning was triumphant”. According to this historian, the refugee scholars became more empirical, less dogmatic, more attuned to “the social realities that their former traditions had tended to neglect”, while American scholars became more philosophical, deeper, more speculative: “Each group learned from the other, learned from the other social sciences, and learned from the inescapable experiences of the 1930s: the ideological struggles, the threat and temptation of totalitarianism, the approach of yet another

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17 An often-quoted example is Laura Fermi’s *Illustrious Immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930-41* (Chicago, 1971).

European war.”¹⁹ H. Stuart Hughes even remarked that the emigration had led to the “deprovincialization”²⁰ of the American mind.

Scholars have continued to state the importance of Weimar thought for postwar western culture. Laqueur noted that Weimar culture “anticipated many intellectual trends and fashions now current in the West”.²¹ Intellectuals’ reflections on the young and struggling republic, attacked by both leftist and rightist radicalism, resonated among American intellectuals at the beginning of the Cold War. Recently, Udi E. Greenberg’s *The Weimar Century: German Émigrés and the Intellectual Foundations of the Cold War* (2014) confirmed that Weimar intellectuals such as Hans Morgenthau (1904-1980) and Carl J. Friedrich (1901-1984) shaped postwar American politics. Greenberg detected a short-lived but commanding “German-American symbiosis”.²² Accordingly, scholars have interpreted Gay’s scholarly writings as a prolongation of German intellectual traditions, which is not remarkable, since many of them are Europeanists. Mark S. Micale and Robert L. Dietle wrote in their introduction to Gay’s *Festschrift* about the group of “German scholar-teacher-intellectuals”, who established the professional study of European post-medieval ideas and culture in North-America during the third quarter of the twentieth century:

“As a species of scholar, the cultural humanist historian in the best tradition of Mitteleuropa is vanishing in an age of academic specialization and cultural fragmentation. As these individuals approach the end of their careers and lives, and as the ‘short twentieth century’ comes to a close, we are in an excellent position to appreciate and to appraise their work to historicize their achievement as a cultural phenomenon in its own right.”²³

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¹⁹ Stern, “German History in America, 1884-1984”, 156.
The richness of Gay’s knowledge of European culture is undisputed. Aschheim attributes this preference for the exploration of ideas and cultural phenomena to Gay, Mosse and Stern’s “Jewish-German bias for culture as explanation and value”: “Their perspectives were always based upon the same – albeit self-critical – liberal and acculturated Bildung assumptions with which they were raised.”

Over the decades Gay himself increasingly emphasized his representation of Weimar’s culture. In one of his lectures to his students, he noted that “many of the refugees from Nazism, eventually landed in the United States, bringing with them the love of strange new deities and the lure of exciting vistas of stale subjects. Their impact has been great and immensely beneficial, and the men they taught are teaching you today.” Gay put the Austrian Sigmund Freud in the same tradition: “He is joined in the pantheon of distant gods, much invoked but little heeded, by Weber, Dilthey, Auerbach, Mannheim, Cassirer, or Panofsky, whom it is fashionable to mention and tempting to neglect.”

**Weimar: Nothing New**

The observation of a continuity between Gay’s historical work and Weimar’s culture was not only seen as a contribution to American culture, but often implied questioning the originality of his thinking. It has been suggested that German-American second-generation historians merely carried out the historical project of the first, which established its career in Weimar. Such claims, however, are not grounded in much research. In general, the 107 German-American émigré historians have for a long time been ignored in the research of the emigration from Nazi Germany, which can in part be explained by the intrinsically national character of historical writing. The number of German historians that emigrated was relatively small. The ones who did emigrate found it harder than

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24 Aschheim, 72.
26 Ibidem.
physicists or philosophers to master a new language in order to find positions that suited their qualifications.  

In the 1980s, the rising interest in German-American émigré historians culminated in a few studies that mainly focused on this first generation. This timing might be due to these émigrés’ own hesitancy to put the objectivity of their historical work open to discussion until they were quite advanced in their careers or retired. Besides, it often took their American colleagues a while to realize the dramatic backgrounds of their colleagues. The historian of the Renaissance Tony Molho expressed his sudden realization that some of the colleagues he had worked with for decades had these eventful pasts. The first-generation of émigré historians consisted predominantly of Meinecke-Schüler, students of the famous German historian Friedrich Meinecke. Examples of these historians are Felix Gilbert (1905-1991), Gustav Mayer (1871-1948), Arthur Rosenberg (1889-1943), Alfred Vagts (1892-1986), Hans Baron (1900-1988), Hans Rothfels (1891-1976), Dietrich Gerhard (1896-1985), Hajo Holborn (1902-1969), Eckardt Kehr (1902-1933), Fritz T. Epstein (1898-1979), Georg F. Hallgarten (1901-1975) and Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905-1999). In 1997 the interest in the emigration of these German historians culminated in a conference about the first generation of German émigré historians at the German Historical Institute in Washington D.C..

These surveys about the first generation, born around 1900, often paid little attention to the second generation, which also included prominent historians such as Georg Iggers (b. 1926), Hans W.

32 Conversation with the author, 3 March 2009.
Gatzke (1915-1987), Klaus Epstein (1927-1967) and Peter Paret (b. 1924). Most studies about second-generation émigrés are short essays, often focusing on the writings of individuals. In 2012, a conference at the German Historical Institute in Washington D.C. and a volume of essay on the second generation, *The Second Generation. Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians* (2016), heeded the demand for more insights the second generation. Yet many questions about its contributions remain. The methodology of younger émigré historians was, in comparison to the “dean” of German Studies in the United States Hajo Holborn, not “new”: “die Fortentwicklung jener ‘intellectual history’, die von Holborn u.a. inzwischen in Amerika auf seiner durch die Analyse sozialer Bewegungen erweiterten Geistesgeschichte geschaffen worden war.”

Gay’s experience of the catastrophic effects of ideological thinking during the Second World War made him “afraid of ideas”, as the intellectual historian Samuel Moyn once observed.

Such criticism, which doubts the originality of the second generation’s work, is reflected in Robert Darnton’s review of Gay’s work on the Enlightenment in 1971. Darnton noted that he did not establish a new historical genre; his work reads as “conventional intellectual history” in the line of Weimar-philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Since the 1960s, social history being en vogue, his intellectual and cultural approach have frequently been obscured. In Germany, a younger, more progressive generation of German historians, which included Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, took over German historical scholarship, but did not build on the cultural approach of émigré historians such as


35 Berghahn, “Deutschlandbilder”, 256.


37 Darnton, “In Search for the Enlightenment”, 114.
Gay, Mosse and Stern.\textsuperscript{38} Even Gay himself frequently doubted the impact of his scholarship. In 1967 he complained a little impatiently that he had not yet established a “school”.\textsuperscript{39} In an interview in 1992 with the Dutch student paper \textit{Folia}, the historian expressed his regrets that his historical approach to European history, infused by psychoanalysis and cultural history, was not followed at American history departments. He attributed this to young scholars’ fears to find a job with such a “specialist approach”.\textsuperscript{40}

Moreover, the assessment of the work of these émigré historians has not been substantiated by thorough research of the connections with their lives.\textsuperscript{41} In general, scholars of the emigration from Nazi Germany to the United States have often immediately jumped from an examination of first generation to American-born children of Holocaust survivors.\textsuperscript{42} In the research that does examine the relationship between émigrés’ lives and works, the focus is mostly on the context of their German-Jewish background and the “trauma” of their experiences in Nazi Germany. In \textit{Children of Job}. American Second Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust (1997), Alan L. Berger perceives the second generation as a “Schicksalgemeinschaft” that was mainly defined by the realities of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{43} Recently, Bernard Baylin noted that these émigrés were “immensely successful”, but he wondered about the “puzzling invisibility” as a German-Jewish cohort: “There is no tradition of historical study of what the ‘second waves’ have experienced.”\textsuperscript{44} The extent to which this émigré generation remembered and cultivated its experiences with National Socialism in the United States, where it took much of its education, is hardly dealt with.

\textsuperscript{38} Berghahn, “Deutschlandbilder”, 271-2.
\textsuperscript{39} “Letter of Gerry J. Cavanaugh to Gay”, 1967, Peter Gay Papers; Box 2; Unprocessed.
\textsuperscript{40} “Interview with Peter Gay”, \textit{Folia}, 38, 5 June 1992, 5-6, 6.
\textsuperscript{41} Most of the essays in \textit{The Second Generation} are historiographical in focus, without exploring the connections with émigré historians’ experiences.
\textsuperscript{43} Berger, \textit{Children of Job}, 12. Although Aschheim does refer to the ambivalence of Mosse, Gay, Stern and Laqueur’s attitudes towards Zionism and their identification with their Jewish backgrounds, this is not further elaborated on. “The Tensions of Historical Wissenschaft”, 74.
\textsuperscript{44} Gerhard Sonnert and Gerald Holton, \textit{What Happened to the Children Who Fled Nazi Persecution} (New York, 2006) xiii.
Cold War Ties

Especially since the 1960s, the narratives of trauma and Bildung to explain the second-generation historians’ careers coincided with interpretations that were tied too closely to a Cold War context. Mosse himself explicitly resisted an exclusive reading of his biography in terms of his experiences with National Socialism. He complained that exile had become stereotyped, exclusively associated with loss and deprivation: “I never experienced the personal and mental deprivations of exile; on the contrary, exile energized me and challenged me as nothing had ever challenged me before.”45 The second generation’s early emigration often fuelled strong ties to American liberalism, which has frequently provoked fierce criticism.

Gay’s lifelong commitment to the United States, his rejection of the student protests in the 1960s and his refusal to join the loud critique of the Vietnam War, encountered much indignation.46 Liberals such as Gay, who established their careers in the postwar period, were often attacked for their allegedly uncritical support of American hegemony. According to the German-American émigré historian Georg Iggers, identifying with liberal American democracy and rejecting every dictatorship developed into an uncritical attitude on the part of many émigrés during the Cold War years towards American politics in Europe and Germany.47 These émigrés were “obsessed” by the question of liberalism’s failure to stop the rise of National Socialism. According to Aschheim, Gay, together with fellow German-Jewish émigré historians George Mosse, Stern and Walter Laqueur, feared “the irrational” and thus frequently embraced a rigid rationality:

“For a while they virtually invented a cultural and intellectual history that placed the study of the variety of irrationalism at its center, they, perhaps, too often clung to an unreflective, regulative notion of rationalism. The ‘rational’ was somehow both self-evident and valid and certainly not part of the problem. Their experience of fascism encouraged a ‘fortress rationality’, one disinclined to accept the intertwining of rationalism and irrationalism.”48

45 George Mosse, Confronting History: A Memoir (Madison, 2000) x.
48 Aschheim, 77.
Much left-wing German and American historical scholarship merely intended to “neutralize the surplus of German history and society into a single, unified Geschichte”.49 This “liberal” view on German history has especially been criticized since the publication of David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley’s The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in the Nineteenth Century (1984).

Aschheim’s suggestion of a “fortress rationality” had earlier been voiced by proponents of Enlightenment Studies such as Roger Emerson, who criticized Gay’s “simplified idea of Christianity” and support of a “completely secular view on the Enlightenment”, “non-Christian, and radically empirical in outlook”.50 David Sorkin added that “Mosse was a myth breaker, Gay was a myth maker.”51 While Sorkin believed that Mosse’s research of National Socialism analyzed cultural mythmaking, he claimed that Gay rather bolstered western superiority.52 It has been claimed that Gay’s work was essentially “modern liberal politics;” a “modernization myth” that reflected the historian’s rigid liberal standards.53 Indeed, defending the values of the Enlightenment such as rationality and progress has often been associated with a neo-conservative movement that was influenced by prominent émigré intellectuals such as Leo Strauss.54

Apparently, a return to émigré historians’ postwar struggles with the legacy of National Socialism for postwar western culture is a delicate affair and its relevance is often challenged. The master narratives of Weimar, trauma and the Cold War deeply polarized views on Gay’s scholarship, while the connections between them were obscured. The second generation’s intimate relationship to two cultures produced an outlook that has often been rather vaguely referred to as the “insider-outsider perspective”.55 However, the actual implications and concrete manifestations of this ambivalent

51 Interview with the author, 23 March 2008.
52 Ibidem.
55 Aschheim notes: “Their peculiar circumstances thus allowed these younger historians to combine tacit understanding of; and an inside feel for, German society with the measured distance of an external perspective"
attitude between distance and familiarity in its writings, are rarely elaborated on.

**Approach**

Gay’s biography is particularly interesting, because his research on the liberal tradition highlights the broader complexities between the need for a strong western identity and the rise of National Socialism at its center. This first extensive research project of the relationship between his life and work from the 1930s and 1970s, based on his personal papers, does not intend to define his place in the historiographies of the many subjects that the historian has examined during his scholarly career. Rather, it explores his experiences and scholarship within the framework of postwar émigré and American intellectuals’ revaluation of western intellectual and cultural traditions after the rise of ideologies in European history. In the designated period many intellectuals endowed German history with an “explanatory power”, which somehow illuminated the postwar condition of the West: “By rejecting parliamentary democracy, Germany became the ‘other’ among advanced nations, challenging self-evident expectations of liberalism and progress.” Although this search for the “lessons” of German history has frequently been said to reflect beliefs in western superiority during the acceleration of the Cold War, Gay’s biography offers a different case. Instead of fixating on the impact of the Cold War or the Second World War, the central concept of western culture in this research highlights the connections and conflicts between the German and American influences that shaped his life and work. The period between the 1930s and 1970s represents the development of his deep involvement with German history in the United States, from where he reflected on the significance of his own experiences in the Third Reich, Germany and the Germans.

Gay’s thinking about western culture is analyzed through three large, instable oppositions: between “Germany” and the “United States”, “ideas” and “ideology”, “history” and “memory”. The first tension between “Germany” and the “United States” is examined in connection to his position as member of the second generation of German-American émigré historians. Although its members were

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“The Tensions of Historical Wissenschaft”, 59.
reluctant to present themselves as a particular group of victims, Gay eventually noted:

“Considering how close we were in age and academic orientation, it is astonishing that we were not closer to one another. I felt particularly friendly towards Mosse, but we never worked together, nor did we two, or the other two [Laqueur and Stern], ever show one another our manuscripts or co-operated on conferences. We did our work, but our close friends were others. […] It must simply be that the youngest generation of Hitler’s refugees occupies a niche different from that of their parents. Integration in the United States increased my distance to my origins.”

Scholars have offered several definitions of the concept of the second generation. The editors of The Second Generation have used a broad definition, including émigrés who were born between 1918 and 1935 in the territory of the Third Reich that also encompassed countries like Czechoslovakia, Austria and Moravia. The émigrés that are examined in this volume emigrated to various countries like the United States, England and Israel. Although this approach has the merit of pointing out the variety of experiences, including lesser known historians, the different nationalities, age and destinations make it hard defining a shared experience of emigration. This dissertation, therefore, defines the second generation as the group of Jewish German-American émigrés that was born in Weimar Germany. At the time of their emigration most of them had consciously experienced Nazi Germany, much more than Weimar’s culture, but were young enough to start a new life in the United States. Therefore, the investigation of these émigrés’ lives and works shifts the emphasis to the American context. Contrary to the first generation, the second generation was able to process its experiences in two countries at the beginning of its career.

Naturally, the exploration of the émigrés’ work and experiences is a complicated affair. Andreas W. Daum is right to note that one should be cautious “in defining categories to help understand particular features of an individual’s life, as well as the plurality of factors that cause an ever-changing relationship between elements of continuity and discontinuity, in the biographies of

58 Daum, “Refugees from Nazi Germany as Historians, 43.
historians as well as in their contributions to scholarship”.

Hence, this research aims to avoid biographically reductive readings by emphasizing the evolving relationship between Gay’s life and work, his own cultivation of his experiences as émigré historian in intellectuals’ debates, and comparisons with other émigré historians of the first and second generation and American intellectuals. Moreover, the analysis of his experiences and work in both the contexts of his memory of the Second World War and his commitment during the Cold War defies straightforward connections between his work and his “trauma” or support of American liberalism.

Secondly, this research analyzes the tension between “ideas” and “ideology” in Gay’s thinking about western culture. Since the 1930s émigré and American intellectuals debated what ideas contributed to a democratic culture. This debate was permeated by the large impact of German émigré thought on American culture, and American intellectuals’ own search for a national identity as part of a transatlantic West. The ensuing clashes and exchanges deeply formed the context of Gay’s own thinking about a transatlantic western culture. What was the relationship between contemporary politics and cultural ideals in his work?

Thirdly, this dissertation examines the correlation between Gay’s memory of the Third Reich and his historical writings. A comparison between his (published and unpublished) accounts of his memories in Nazi Germany and his historical writings, explores whether there are shared themes, emphases and omissions. Moreover, this research examines his references to the memory of his confrontation with National Socialism in the public debate about the Holocaust in the United States.

Organization

This research project explores Gay’s biography based on the historian’s historical writings and personal papers, which are stored at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Columbia University in New York. Furthermore, I have been granted access to the lectures, personal, books and course notes that were still present at his home in New York. In addition, I have interviewed colleagues, students and the historian himself dozens of hours.

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Chapter I, “Evaluating Exile”, analyzes the early development Gay’s German-American perspective on western culture. What were the continuities and discontinuities between his German and American lives? This chapter examines his German-Jewish background, his first experiences and education in the United States, his political commitment and his attitudes towards the Nazi past. It compares his experience of emigration and his intellectual development to that of first generation émigré intellectuals and the group of American-born Jewish intellectuals that came to shape postwar American culture.

The second Chapter, “American ‘Lessons’ from German History”, discusses Gay’s dissertation about the German socialist Eduard Bernstein in 1952 against the background of American and émigré intellectuals’ debates about western culture. To what degree was there a need for German émigré intellectuals in postwar American academia after the Second World War? It analyzes the significance of the context of American scholarship for Gay’s research into the German past. What was the relationship between German and American intellectual and cultural traditions in his dissertation? In the course of the 1950s, McCarthyism and the mobilization of American universities in the Cold War intensified the debate about western culture.

At the beginning of the 1950s Gay came to view the Enlightenment as the founding narrative of western culture. The next Chapter, “Lies and Enlightenment”, provides an outline of the postwar debate about the contested legacy of the eighteenth in the twentieth century. It analyzes Gay’s endeavors to construct a narrative of the period that proved its contemporary relevance without reducing it to another “myth” of modernity. Why did Gay, who moved to Columbia’s History Department in 1956, emphasize the essential role of historical writing to create anti-ideological narratives in a time when many other scholars failed to see its relevance? What were the interactions between his use of German Geistesgeschichte and the American liberal context in his scholarship?

At the end of the 1960s, however, Gay’s views on western culture were fiercely attacked by a new generation of scholars and students. “Weimar” now became endowed with a new, controversial meaning among American intellectuals that obscured his own views on the relevance of German intellectual and cultural traditions for postwar western culture. Chapter IV, “Reinventing Weimar in the Sixties”, explores Gay’s complex reactions to leftist radicalism that tended to leave him isolated in the
conservative camp. This chapter gives an assessment of the degree to which Gay’s *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (1968) can be interpreted as a counter-narrative of the dissent of the 1960s. How did the historian’s historical approach develop in order to write a narrative of German history that appealed to an American public?

Finally, the last chapter, “History and Memory”, examines the evolving relationship between Gay’s memory of the Third Reich and his historical scholarship. This chapter explores how the relationship between his writing of “history” and “memory” developed under the influence of the American debate on the Holocaust, his contacts to Germans, his visits to Germany and his psychoanalytical training. In what sense was his research of the liberal tradition rooted in an avoidance of his own experiences with anti-Semitism?
Chapter I:
Evaluating Exile

Introduction:
The publication of Gay’s memoirs *My German Question* (1998) about his youth in Nazi-Germany was not widely anticipated. Not victimhood but academic mastery had seemed to be his biggest claim to a European past. After the publication of his bestselling biography of Freud in 1988, he still was as productive a scholar as ever. That same year, Gay retired from Yale University and became the founding director of the New York Public Library Center for Scholars and Writers. Having been driven his whole life by an unparalleled work ethic, he continued to publish on European, German and American history. In the 1990s, he finished the last large volumes of his series about the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie; the little book *Why Romantics Matter?* appeared one year before his death in 2015.

Until the publication of his memoirs, Gay had, like many others, been reluctant to elaborate on the ties between his experiences in Nazi Germany and his historical career in the United States. The hesitancy to disclose autobiographical information is not unusual among historians who strive for the ideal of objectivity. At the time of its publication, this memoir of an émigré, who was fourteen when he escaped the Nazis, was just a little after-shock of the many Holocaust memoirs that had already been published at the end of the 1980s. These first-person narratives often became more widely read than the works of professional historians. The story of the emigration of Gay and his family seemed much less exclusively suffused with misery. They had not been beaten or imprisoned in a

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concentration camp. During and soon after the war, he maintained a sense of pride being a German, while ignoring his Jewish background. Still, in the last stage of his career the publication of his memoirs reflected his need to elaborate on his experiences with the “anti-Enlightenment”. Based on an analysis of his published and unpublished accounts of his experiences, this chapter discusses Gay’s emigration from Nazi Germany to the United States, illustrating the development of his dual German-American perspective on western culture. Although the historian’s life story was atypical, he was convinced that his individual experiences generated significant insights into both the German and American past. It appears that his move to the United States saved him and his parents, but formed only in part a break with his past.

The German-Jewish Past

In 1998, the publication of My German Question compelled Gay’s cousin Paul Kwilecki to write him about his own memories. When the Gays, at the time called “Fröhlich”, were still trapped in Nazi Germany, Kwilecki and his family were already in the United States, where they had arrived in the 1920s. Kwilecki still remembers his family’s attempts to assist them in their emigration:

“It brought back memories of my family in those days. A Sunday ritual: Dad, Uncle Ralph, Uncle Max, Uncle Alfred, and Aunt Grace gathered at Aunt Frances’s which was the old family home. I can see them all around the fireplace, a small coal fire burning in the grate, talking business, golf, Aunt Grace’s insomnia, or how they proposed to get your family and the Wolfsohns to Quincy or Bainbridge. That room, that house, those personalities were so essentially German they themselves would not have been out of place in Berlin. Albert and I, respectively nine and ten in 1938, had little time for them.”

In this vividly described scene, tragedy was acted out on a homely stage. Eventually, their American relatives would save the Fröhlichs, but only after the Reichskristallnacht in November 1938.

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63 Chapter V elaborates on the relationship between Gay’s life and work.
64 “Letter of Paul Kwilecki to Gay”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 22; Unprocessed.
Like Gerhard (George) Mosse, Peter Joachim Fröhlich was born in Berlin, although the two later historians grew up in highly different neighborhoods. The Mosse family resided on its country estate, near the village of Schenkendorf, which was built by George’s maternal grandfather Rudolf Mosse in 1882. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Mosse media empire had established the family as one of the liberal leaders of Wilhelminian and Weimar Germany. It published Berlin’s most widely read paper, the Berliner Tageblatt. A little more to the west in Berlin was a small street, Schweidnitzerstrasse, in the district of Wilmersdorf, where the Fröhlich family lived. The Fröhlich residence was decorated with watercolors by Josef Menzel, who specialized in “decorating china plates and rustic scenes” – not the celebrated German artist Adolph Menzel, as Gay later emphasized.

The Fröhlichs did not share the wealth or cultural sophistication of the Mosses. In his memoirs, Gay refers a little ironically to his parents’ respectable cultural artifacts, like Caruso’s aria’s and Karl May’s books. They did own a piano, which his mother played quite well. His father Moritz Gay was born in the village of Podjanze, near Kempen in Upper Silesia, as the son of an innkeeper. Moritz, a “self-made man”, had left school at only fourteen: “He was a striving bourgeois, a faithful partisan of the German Social Democratic Party (the SPD), attesting not to his radicalism so much as to its respectability.” Peter spent the first thirteen years in a German “middle-income and lower-middle-income” neighborhood. As a salesman in glass and porcelain, his father did have a car for business purposes, which was, as he later noted, quite rare at the time.

Peter’s upbringing was shaped by his parents’ recent break with their religious Jewish forbears. The families of other second-generation émigré historians like Mosse and Fritz Stern represented long traditions of acculturation; Stern’s paternal grandparents of both sides had even converted to Lutheran Protestantism: a “further step to integration”. Living the secular revolution, the Fröhlichs were much more radical in their aversion of religion in general and Judaism in particular. Gay has even called his parents “anti-religious”. They were registered as atheists, which was not

65 Gay, My German Question, 23.
66 Idem., 8.
67 Stern, Five Germany’s I Have Known (New York, 2006) 22.
68 Gay, My German Question, 50.
mandatory: “To become Konfissionslos was to make a choice. It was an act of aggression.”

The Fröhlichs were somewhat condescending about “three-day Jews” in their family, who celebrated Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, to forget about the whole business for the rest of the year. Gay’s personal notes and memoirs stress his complete identification with his parents’ position at that time.

Notwithstanding this secular stance, Peter’s childhood was shaped by cultural ambivalence. The later professor of European history confessed that he was still not able to make sense of his parents’ decision to circumcise him. They infused their use of the German language with a few Yiddish words like “ganif”, “meschugge” and “risches”. While his parents despised the stigmatizing word “goyim”, they did use “g.n.”, “goyim naches”, to refer to activities that they considered particularly foolhardy, like mountain climbing or water skiing. On the anniversaries of his parents’ deaths, Moritz always lit a candle. But these remnants of a Jewish past did not soften their “aggressive” stance towards Judaism: they were Germans. The Fröhlichs did have a hard time taking seriously the regime that told them otherwise: “It was all in Mein Kampf, but Hitler’s threat had been too implausible to believe.” They denied most connections between the rise of the Nazis and German culture, and considered themselves to be representatives of the true Germany.

Later Gay could not remember the change of power on January 30, 1933. He was nine-and-a-half, and just about ready to enter the gymnasium. In his memoirs, he stresses that his teachers were generally not convinced Nazis. Also in his unpublished accounts he recalled that teachers made him “doubtfully welcome at school—a weak-sounding phrase that is not deliberate understatement”. Yet the Nazis were omnipresent at his school. In the book that they used during their music lessons at school, Heinrich Heine’s poem “Die Lorelei” was now written by an “author unknown” (Gay later checked: the book was indeed rewritten after 1933). At school, his German identity was facilitated by his appearance: he “did not look Jewish”. But his cousin Edgar did, and was often victimized,

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69 Gay, “Six Years”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19; Unprocessed.
70 Gay, My German Question, 55.
71 Idem., 112.
72 Marion Kaplan, “Review: My German Question”, Aufbau, No. 22, 23 October 1998, 17. Kaplan notes that Gay was lucky, because Jewish children who stayed at public schools were generally easy targets.
73 Gay, “Notebook 1983”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1, Unprocessed.
74 Gay, My German Question, 34.
dragged before Der Stürmer with its pictures of Jews who molested “helpless blondes”, and made to read it. Naturally, Jewish boys were excluded from celebrations on occasions of triumph or announcements of policy. During these celebrations, they wandered quietly in the Hof.

Peter’s imagination thrived well in the Third Reich. One of his favorite readings was an American detective series of little paperback books, 64 to 96 pages, in which a John Kling was the hero. But he read practically everything he could lay his hands on: comic novels and novels about adolescents. At that time, he also discovered most of Dickens (in German). One of his neighbors, who would later perish in Auschwitz, lent him many of these books, which his less educated parents didn’t have. With his own funds, Peter managed to build up a modest library of his own, which also contained Hugh Lofting’s series on the travels of a Dr. Dolittle, accounts of polar explorations and children’s versions of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Stimulated by this whirlwind of trash and classics, he embarked on writing a comedy, an imitation of one of the plays of the German playwright Curt Goetz. The setting was a world war between good and evil; some of the action took place on the moon. In short, his narrative described an arms’ race involving the development of the best spacecraft.

My German Question stands out in its emphasis on the persistence of daily life, which often blurred the memory of public events and regained the complexity of his experiences: “I can never, to this day, hear the aria ‘Es waren zwei Königsinder’ from Lehar’s ‘Merry Widow’ without having tears in my eyes. It reminds me, in some mysterious ways, that in the years that I was growing up, there were gratifications that, however coolly I took them, I swallowed deeply. I was not always in mourning.” He painted his bicycle blue and often skated on Berlin’s flooded tennis courts. Until 1938, he went to football matches with his father. He even saw the Olympics of 1936 in Berlin, his father had bought tickets for the event years before. Their seats turned out to be hidden in a small cadre of Hungarians, almost directly opposite the prestige boxes. Peter’s American family, and his ferocious reading of Winnetou, had already installed in him a sense of American greatness; he worshipped the black athlete Jesse Owens. Invisible between the Hungarians, he and his father managed to cheer for every American triumph, hoping to see Hitler’s athletes fail.

75 “Notebook 1983”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1; Rare Books and Manuscripts Room, Columbia University.
Peter’s encounters with Germans were complex. When he was about to complete his second year at the gymnasium in 1935, he had to choose between English and the Classics. When he chose English, half-consciously anticipating an emigration that had not been too openly discussed yet, the director of the school called his parents to tell them that such a talented boy should benefit from a proper classical education. Nazism often seemed “a temporary madness”, but the many Germans who remained their friends did “us no favor”. With the noose tightening, mixed signals from friends and relations in their immediate environment complicated the Fröhlichs’ view on their own situation. Ironically, his father’s business became more profitable in the year that they left Nazi Germany, making them richer than they had been for a long time. Like so many other families, his parents believed that they would be spared, because his father was a wounded *Frontkämpfer* during the First World War. Once in the United States, Moritz was happy to give up his medal when a war measure demanded a collection of iron.

**Emigration**

After the Nuremberg laws of 1935, Jews’ legal and social status was further undermined in accelerated pace. Kristallnacht, which took place in the night from nine to ten November 1938, was Gay’s most acute memory of his life in the Third Reich. The next day, he biked through the city, across Berlin’s business district, seeing chars of broken glassware: “I read it – no, I feel it – as a catastrophe that deepened my rancor against Germany and the Germans, already powerful enough, into an indiscriminate hatred that survived long stretches of time quite unabated.” His uncle and aunt’s shop was trashed. Moritz temporarily hid at a friend’s place, but came home the following day.

From 1937 on, the Fröhlichs’ discussions about emigration become more urgent. In the spring of 1938, Peter was finally expelled from the Goethe Gymnasium. That same year, his father’s associate Pelz threw him out of the company. Peter and his cousin Edgar started to study English for four months at the end of the year, because it was a matter of course that the United States would be their final destination. In his memoirs, Gay saw the origins of his American identity in Germany: “I

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77 Idem., 133.
took to English as if it were my mother tongue that I had mysteriously forgotten.” The first book he read in English was a cheap paperback of Bernard Shaw’s tragedy *Saint Joan*, which he would bring with him in exile.

But first there seemed countless obstacles to be overcome. In spite of the Fröhlichs’ American family, emigration appeared to be difficult because Moritz was relegated to the stricter Polish quota. He was born in the Silesian territory that was turned over to Poland in the peace treaties following the First World War; 25,000 German Jews, but only one of fewer than 6,000 Polish Jews was eligible for emigration to the United States each year. Another obstacle was that every refugee needed an affidavit, a written testimony of an American that the immigrant wouldn’t become a financial burden to the state. In the 1930s, American visas were increasingly hard to come by; especially since the country was slowly emerging from the Great Depression. In 1937 the United States, and many other western countries, further limited Jewish migration; the affidavit-system was a useful weapon against massive migration. Luckily, the Fröhlichs’ relatives on Peter’s mother’s side, the Kwileckis, had gone to the United States when the economy worsened during the first years of the Weimar Republic. From Breslau they moved to Quincy, a tiny Florida town. Peter’s “Onkel” Alfred Kwilecki married a young American woman who became aunt Grace.

The Fröhlichs’ American family did everything it could to help its German relatives. There was frantic correspondence with Quincy and the other “Kwilecki headquarters” in Bainbridge, Georgia. Peter’s uncle and aunt even called in political acquaintances like the influential senator from Georgia Walter George and the local congressman Edward Cox for help. In the meantime, Moritz sent letters to all Fröhlichs he could find in an American phonebook, to see if there was a distant cousin that could help them as well. He continued to apply for emigration to various destinations. His incentive for emigration in his *Einwanderungversuch* was necessarily understated: “Weil ich meinen Beruf in Deutschland nicht mehr ausüben kann.” Finally, the Fröhlichs secured a visa for Cuba, from where they intended to travel to the United States. In the last days before they left, Moritz’ nephew Jan wrote

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78 Idem., 115.
80 “Notebook 1983”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1; Unprocessed.
the Fröhlichs a farewell letter in (broken) English, in which he urged them to send a telegram as soon as they had arrived in New York. Of course, no reference was made to the circumstances in which they had to leave Germany, or maybe only implicitly in the last part of the letter: “It is to be hoped that you both, especially you, my good boy, feel well, and that the awful weather which is now, will not hurt you.”

In his suitcase, Gay packed Curt Goetz’s novel and the Bernard Shaw play. At the end of his life, he still possessed the crystal plate and many photos, that they managed to bring with them. A large crystal bowl was broken on its way.

In his memoirs, Gay called his father the “hero” of his story. Indeed, Moritz played a decisive role in saving the family when he decided at the last moment to take a boat earlier than originally planned. The “Iberia” sailed on April 27, 1939, two weeks before their original boat, the ill-fated “St. Louis”. In Havana, the Fröhlichs watched how the “St. Louis” was denied access to the island’s harbor. All its passengers were sent back to Europe, where only the quarter that was directed to Great Britain survived the Holocaust. In his memoirs, Gay noticed the key role of sheer luck and melodrama in our lives: “Why does life so often turn out like the plot of a cheap novel?”

In Havana, their American family helped them financially as much as they could. The Fröhlichs stayed in Cuba for two years, from May 1939 until January 1941, before being admitted to the United States.

The Fröhlichs’ stay in Cuba was no limbo, though, but a genuine preparation for their emigration to the United States. Peter met Americans for the first time; while wandering around, he went to talk to them in restaurants: “They seemed so free!”

Peter quickly adapted to Cuban life. At the Havana Business Academy, he developed his linguistic skills. The school trained Cubans preparing themselves to do business with Americans. He became editor of the Havana Business Herald, published “by the pupils and for the pupils of the Havana Business Academy”.

In his pieces for this publication, he addressed his public with “We Cubans”, suggesting at least a desire to rapidly shake off his German past. Onkel Alfred bought them subscriptions to the Saturday Evening Post, Collier’s, Liberty and other magazines. Peter concentrated on the serialized novels to improve his

81 “Letter of Jan Kwilecki to Moritz Gay”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 21; Unprocessed.
82 Gay, My German Question, 28.
83 Interview with the author, 23 January 2009.
84 Gay, “Editorial”, Havana Business Harold, August 1940; Peter Gay Papers; Box 21; Unprocessed.
English. Halfway 1940, he was able to read stories in Cuba’s English-language daily *The Havana Postscript*. At the Havana Business Academy, he also learned typing and followed a course in short story composition. He prepared to join American popular culture by writing short stories with titles like “Love came too early” and “Summer’s End”. These stories, still in the archives of Columbia University, were set in a future existence: New York. They described the lives of common people, often romantically inclined, with American names. In the magazines he found the stories about baseball hard to grasp, but enthusiastically picked a team to root for (the New York Yankees). In 1940, before his arrival in the United States, he started to dream in English. Ultimately, the Fröhlichs’ American family succeeded in collecting the necessary money for their affidavits. Because his mother’s health, which had always been bad, now worsened, Peter was alone when on January 10, 1941, he first stepped to American soil.

**American Exile**

Far from the refugee center in New York, Peter stayed for a couple of months with family in Atlanta awaiting his parents’ arrival. When they arrived, they moved on to another “real” American city, Denver, because of its favorable climate for his mother’s weak health. Denver’s refugee community was small. Gay later emphasized the value of his experiences of American culture outside New York: “For many, their little world within a world, natural and benign as it was, became an obstacle to assimilation.”85 While New York had a community of maybe 150,000 refugees, he estimated that Denver’s community was not larger than “5, 6, 7 thousand”.86 His father’s attitude actively stimulated Gay’s immersion in American culture. Moritz despised what he called the “Beiunskis”, refugees who complained: “Bei uns in Germany was everything better.”87

In 1943, the Fröhlichs became American citizens at the earliest moment possible, while their transformation from Fröhlich to Gay was in part a social decision (their American family had done the same, because “Fröhlich” appeared to be difficult to pronounce for Americans), in part a statement of

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85 Gay, “At home in America”, 36.
86 Interview with the author, 23 January 2009.
their eagerness to embrace their American identity. Still, their radical decision to reinvent themselves, as Americans this time, did not estrange them completely from the larger German émigré community. Moritz was a member of Club 1946, an organization for refugees in Denver. On 30 April 1986, Gay mentioned in a letter to the *Aufbau* the great role that this refugee paper played in his and his parents’ lives: “In any event, in this post-war era where we all feel very secure, many of us think back to the *Aufbau* with a great deal of warm feeling.”

Life in exile was never effortless. Gay attended East High School in the class of 1942. But in January, after one semester, he had to help out his parents financially and dropped out. The experience of exile was never as hard for his generation, though, as for his parents. His father, who was almost fifty years old, struggled with impaired hearing while learning English at Denver Opportunity School. He became a salesman for manufacturers of sports coats and leisure jackets, but with his German accent he could not talk people into buying. He did hard physical work in a factory, which damaged his health. His parents’ poverty created obstacles for their son that other émigré historians such as Mosse and Stern did not have to deal with. But it also contributed to his quick landing in American society. His first job was as a shipping clerk in the Imperial Cap factory. For two years, he worked in a hat factory. Even at university, he continued to have a variety of sidelines, mostly as a salesman. He sold neckties at Cottrell’s, ice cream at the Purity Creamer, and shoes. He also took up a job as shipping clerk for 12 dollars a week, which rose to 16 dollars because the minimum wage went up from 30 cents to 40 cents an hour.

In these years Gay had to take care of his own education. From the beginning of his exile, he immersed himself in American culture. After work he went to the library to read American literature and history books. Against his father’s wishes, he developed a passion for jazz of artists like Glenn Miller and Artie Shaw. In return, he felt that he received “American Kindness everywhere”. While “shabby in my appearance, awkward in my behavior, far from certain in my English, I could have been a figure of fun”. Instead, he encountered “a decency, a receptivity of whatever gifts I might possess”. Two of his teachers during his fleeting attendance at high school in the fall and winter of

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88 Gay, “Letter to Aufbau”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 3.2.
1944 “seemed to see some promise in me, and they exercised their power for my benefit”. 89 His English teacher Helen Hunter arranged for him to sit his exam after a few private sessions, which was necessary to apply for a university. Gay remembers the paper “Was Hamlet mad?” he wrote for these sessions, although later he could not recall its exact line of argument. At twenty, he was granted a full scholarship to the University of Denver, without which he would never have been able to resume his academic education. He quit his daytime job, but continued working in the evenings, weekends, and during holidays.

Denver University formed a next step of his integration into American culture. For fellow second-generation émigré historians such as Stern, but also for the Austrian Raul Hilberg (1926-2007), the large émigré community of which they became part in New York formed a continuity with the German world they had known. In Denver Gay, on the other hand, faced a protestant, white, dominantly middle-class campus. In 1943, there were virtually no blacks at DU; Gay later remembered “one, perhaps two”. There were more Asian students; he could recall two or three Japanese students. All students were in uniform. In spite of its WASP look, Gay noted as one of the three speakers of the 50th reunion of the class of ’46 in 1996 his warm memories of his time at Denver University: “it was the inherent, friendly generosity of this student body that invited me, the outsider with a strange and gloomy history, to be one of the crowd at DU.” 90 Fellow students “initiated” him into the secrets of American football, although he would continue to prefer European football. 91

Gay passed the English placement test he was compelled to take, so he could avoid the introductory English course, “dreaded and widely regarded as humiliating”. He remembered a speech he gave during Dr. Paul’s public speaking course, two-and-a-half years after having left Cuba. Dr. Paul interrupted him halfway: “You have some slight trace of foreign accent. Don’t tell me where you are from, but you weren’t born in this country, were you?” I allowed that I wasn’t. ‘Let me guess’, he went on, ‘southern England?’” His father now sold men’s clothes, doing a little better. The Gays finally seemed to have found their American bearings.

89 Gay, “At home in America”, 37.
90 Gay, “Address of the Class of ’46”, undated; Peter Gay’s Personal Collection.
91 Gay, “Address of the Class of ’46”.
Gay always depended on cultural mentors such as his German neighbor. Also George Cavender, his civics teacher at high school, made a lasting impression. He had attracted Cavender’s attention in his short semester at the school. His teacher introduced him to the work of Thurman Arnold, the assistant attorney general to Roosevelt. Thurman’s critique of capitalism, *Folklore of Capitalism* (1937), was the first book he bought in the United States. Years later, in a student magazine, he was referred to as a “disciple of Thurman and Hemingway”. His critical stance towards capitalism, especially strong in the 1940s, coincided with an adoration of the quintessential American novelist Ernest Hemingway. In 1941, he read Hemingway’s novel about the antifascist movement during the Spanish civil war, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940): “The book that interested me more than any other novel when I first read it three years ago. I have reread it since then.” Later, however, he would come to dismiss Hemingway’s “forced virility”. On several occasions, he referred to his still painful memory of his initial inability to distinguish between the novelists Sinclair Lewis and Upton Sinclair.

It has been claimed that German refugees’ superior training at their Central European schools and at *Gymnasien* allowed them to thrive in American institutions and education. But it is essential for an understanding of Gay’s generation of young émigrés that its increasing familiarity with American culture in exile coincided with a growing understanding of German and European culture. Different from older émigrés, an intimacy with parts of German culture (like Heine!) was hindered by Nazi censorship, and only developed in American exile. Gay read the weekly essays of Malcolm Lowry in *The New Republic*, “Long didactic reviews” that introduced him to novelists such as Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster “of whom I had never heard”. He found the columns of the literary critic E.B. White very instructive as well. *The New Republic* was the first magazine he subscribed to: “It was my only luxury”. In this manner, he continued to develop his education in European culture:

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92 “World Union”, published by the Institute of World Affairs, 1945; Peter Gay Papers; Box 23; Unprocessed.
93 Like Gay, Hemingway spent a few years in Cuba.
95 Gay, “At home in America”, 37.
96 Interview with the author, 23 January 2009.
“It sounds conceited, but I thought of myself as a European intellectual.” While in Nazi Germany he had mostly identified with the United States, but as American he became more “European” as well.

In Denver, his most important mentor in German culture was the minister of a Methodist Church, Harvey Potthoff, with whom he remained close until the end of his life. Potthoff was the son of a German-born Methodist minister, who had studied at Harvard to become a professor of Christian theology at the Iliff School of Theology. He wrote nine books about spirituality and theology. The student and minister became friends, although Gay was “not a Methodist, not a Christian, not even a good Jew, but a principled unbeliever showing no prospect for spiritual reformation”. He was introduced to Potthoff’s youth group, which met weekly, through other students after two years in the United States. Interestingly, his self-perception as “European intellectual” also fuelled his attraction to this youth group: “I thought that these Christians were very interesting.” They were more serious than the average student at Denver University: “The religious commitment held so strongly by many DU undergraduates was a large ingredient in this earnestness.” With them he discussed ethical issues, race or the travail of the Nisei (the children of Japanese immigrants) stranded in Colorado. Religion was an important topic “even for the irreligious.” Potthoff’s intellectual and cultural tastes appealed to the young émigré. At his funeral, Gay remembered the minister asking him whether he liked chamber music. He had only heard operas at home, so he answered that he didn’t care much about it. Potthoff then put on a recording of Beethoven’s string quartet opus 135: “If I had ever a converting experience it was this.” Potthoff encouraged Gay to take a course in music, which he did. The minister introduced him to Iliff, whose courses counted at DU, and encouraged him to take philosophy courses with Dr. Bernhardt. These were valuable contacts, because on his campus there was only one philosophy professor, Dr. Dickinson, who specialized, “very much so”, in the American philosopher John Dewey. When Gay proposed to take a reading course with him on the English empiricists, notably Locke and Hume, “he acquiesced to supervise me, because, after all, they had some family

97 Ibidem.
98 Ibidem.
99 “Address of the Class of ’46”.
100 In 1999, Gay would publish a little book about Mozart, a composer of the eighteenth-century age of Enlightenment.
relation to his favorite philosopher”. At Illif, he benefitted from this and other “splendid” philosophy courses, which opened large vistas. His later penchant for theoretical reflection in his scholarly work is already present in papers like “Webster’s Folly. The nature of reality and the problem of definition” and another one on Plato’s metaphysics for a course on the philosophy of religion. He wrote a paper on Plato’s “Timaeus”, “probably his most difficult dialogue”. His interest in Plato would lead to his initial plan to study philosophy at Harvard, but the grant he received for Columbia’s Department of Public Law and Government appeared to be much larger.

Gay’s early (fictional) writing in English, which he went on to pursue in the United States, reflected and encouraged his acculturation. The later supervisor of his dissertation, the political scientist and German émigré Franz Neumann, never learned to write English with literary ease, which complicated the reception of much of his work in the United States. But from his Cuban days on, the much younger émigré Gay expressed a talent and determination to develop his writing skills: “You need a great amount of practice writing before you tackle humor as it absolutely demands a skill.” He wrote short stories, like “One Good man and one True”, a politically inspired story about jury duty. He even tried to write a book inspired by Thurman’s “irreverent, tough-minded analysis of the political process”, “New measures, new men”. His confidence was evident in his sending off this essay to a publisher, “Harper I think”, who refused to publish it. Other projects had more success. He won second prize with an essay in a contest sponsored by Hunter College: “How can American Colleges or other Social Institutions Promote Appreciation of the Cultures of Other Peoples and Co-operation Among Them?”. He went on to win a contest with the essay “What Must We Do to Improve the Health and Well-being of the American People?”. In an interview with the magazine Town Meeting about his prize, he mentioned that he had always been interested in social issues, and that “the health of the American nation is a social rather than a medical question”.

101 “Address of the Class of ’46”.
102 Stuart Hughes, The Sea Change, 113.
103 “Notes on Cuba”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 22.
104 “One Good Man and One True”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 22; Unprocessed.
105 “Interview with Peter Gay”, Town Meeting, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1; Unprocessed.
the refugee thought of the United States. He answered that it exceeded all his expectations: he wanted
to stay in Denver for the rest of his life.

A professor later wrote in a recommendation letter about Gay’s “outstanding record as leader
of group discussions. […] We used him to give lectures for assemblies and at high schools and
universities.” At Denver University, he made friends among faculty and students. He even ran for
student president in 1945, “losing to an immensely popular football player by only six votes: 261 to
255”. His mother thought that her son would become “some sort of Walter Lippmann”, the famous
American-Jewish writer and journalist of German ancestry. The editors of the student paper even
asked him to continue his column “The Gay Outlook” in the Denver Clarion, a student paper for
which he wrote a weekly column from 1943 to 1946. After his move to New York. Privately, he
himself was less expectant about his future in Denver: “I went to this not very good university, I
thought by myself ‘you don’t get rich, but you can make a decent living.’”

The Past in the Present

Germany never moved to the past, although Gay kept on trying. The straight-A student later boosted
that he did not take advantage of his knowledge of the German language in choosing topics for term
papers. But the Gays worried about the family members that were left in Germany. After the war, they
found out that his father’s two sisters Esther and Recha were murdered in Auschwitz. A “return to the
cheerfulness and confidence of his youth” was impossible: “I was, to put it tersely, enveloped in an
aura of hatred and dismay.”

However, unlike other German émigrés of his generation, such as Henry Kissinger (b. 1923),
he did not join the army to fight the Germans. Kissinger was born in same year as Gay, fled Nazi
Germany around the same time, while both became Americans in 1943. But Kissinger had already
arrived in the United States in 1938 and had had several years of education when the Gays were still
struggling to adapt to their new country. The later National Security Advisor could more confidently

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106 “Letter of a Professor of Denver University”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19; Unprocessed.
107 Gay, My German Question, 38.
108 Interview with the author, 14 March 2009.
109 Gay, My German Question, 189.
interrupt his education at City College in New York to be drafted in the same year that he obtained citizenship. Besides, it must have been hard for Gay to leave his sickly mother and struggling father. He himself suffered from depressions: “I did want to join the army, but my health was not very good and they wouldn’t take me.”110 Even when he disembarked in Cuba, he realized that his liberation was wrecked: he was “numbed, frozen, racked by anxieties, doubts, spells of dismay that never really paralyzed me, but cost me much suffering”.111 After a traffic accident in New York in 1946, which he related to the German-American “daydream” he was still living, he was taken to a hospital. His Onkel Alfred wrote to his parents that Peter had talked to a doctor about his depressions and offered to pay for treatment.112

In spite of their shared hardship, Gay and his father’s cultivation of attitudes towards Germany reveal a gap of generational experience. Next to his intention to integrate into American culture, Morris Gay, as he was now called, was quick to restore relations with German contacts and friends after the war. On 20 March 1951, only six years after the war, he published an article in the paper Der Sport-Herold with the headline: “Erinnerungen eines alten Frankfurter Eintrachtlers”. In this article, the émigré wished the football team he had always supported in Germany, the “Frankfurter Eintrachtlers”, luck for an upcoming tournament.113 Morris Gay maintained a lively correspondence with former German colleagues and friends. He tried to convince his son that it was impossible to condemn a whole nation, a statement that Gay “would never completely adopt”.114 During the war, Gay largely remained attached to German culture, but after the war, in midsummer, “word of the death camps and the Nazi murder of millions had trickled out of Europe”. Just after 1945, quite late for someone who was so concerned with the European war, he acknowledged that the news about the Holocaust was true: “We were to learn – and some of this information took months, even years, to emerge – that the Nazis had continued their killing spree to the end, even when they knew the war was

110 Interview with the author, 13 April 2009.
111 “Notebook 1983”.
112 “Letter of Alfred Kwilecki to Morris Gay”, 25 April 1947; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2.2; Unprocessed.
113 Morris Gay, “Erinnerungen eines alten Frankfurter Eintrachtlers”, Der Sport-Herold, 20 März 1951, page unknown; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19; Unprocessed.
114 Gay, My German Question, 4.
lost.” Yet his eventual confrontation with the full extent of Nazi crimes sparked his own processing of his German past.

In that same summer, after seven years of silence, Gay first opened up about his experiences in Nazi Germany. He had won a scholarship of The Institute of World Affairs for an international summer seminar at Salisbury in Northwest Connecticut. During one of the forums, three refugees from Hitler—from Austria, Luxembourg and Germany—presented “an evening of reminiscences.” “It was a memorable act of self-liberation—now I might be free to rethink my feelings about my German past.” In “The Gay Outlook”, he endorsed Truman’s plea for a separate Jewish state. In a review of Welles Sumner’s The Time for Decision in 1945, he argued in favor of a partition of Germany.

While he blended well with his schoolmates in Denver, there were occasions on which he felt the well of experience that distinguished him from his American class-mates. In his later address to D.U.’s “Class of ’46,” he recalled that a teacher initiated a debate on a German man who was confronted with the dilemma whether he should help Jewish fugitives, although he would risk the lives of his own kids. While his classmates stated their understanding of this German's hesitation, Gay excitedly advocated that he was obliged to help the refugees. In another class, he could not overcome his disgust of Wagner’s anti-Semitism, while his teacher defended the position that geniuses were exempted from bourgeois morality. Culture, particularly German culture, was a matter of politics. Although Gay claimed that he did not want to cash-in on his inside knowledge of German history and culture, his student papers reveal his preoccupation with the country that expelled him, albeit often implicitly. In a paper in 1943 he examined the backgrounds of Polish Foreign Policy in the Second World War for a course on International Politics. In June 1945, he finished a paper about “the Spanish Mein Kampf” for the course “History of the Mediterranean”. In this paper entitled “Que es ‘Lo Novo’. A Study of the Ideology of Spanish Fascism”, his translation of a book by a fascist author

\[115\] Idem., 185.
\[116\] Idem., 184.
\[117\] Gay, “Review”, The Iliff Review (Spring, 1945) page unknown; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.2.
\[118\] Gay, “Address of the Class of ’46”.
\[119\] Gay, “Polish Foreign Policy in World War II”, 8 december 1943; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19.
into English, he made use of the Spanish that he had picked up in Cuba. Even his own experiences with National Socialism were reflected in these papers, for example when he quoted a Nazi children song “Heute gehört uns Deutschland, morgen die ganze Welt” to illustrate the deep penetration of Nazi ideology in German society.\textsuperscript{121}

At Columbia, where he moved the next year, Gay’s antipathy for Germany sometimes acquired a student-like flair. In 1948, he wrote to a friend: “You thoroughly spoiled my dinner (I found your note at the dinner table next to my plate) by informing me that the Moral Rearmament Conference is a semi-Nazi, or rather not a wholly ‘pure’ outfit.”\textsuperscript{122} At most times, German history was no laughing matter. The stream of news stories about victims and survivors and the Nurnberg trials “only sustained my resistance to a less emotional condemnation of Germany. […] In the years that followed, I watched postwar Germany with the hawk eyes of a diligent and vindictive probation officer.”\textsuperscript{123} And he did not like what he saw: Adenauer’s appointment of the ex-Nazi Hans Globke, Herbert von Karajan at the Berlin Philharmonic... The BRD, he realized, was not an absolute break with the past.

Apparently, Peter Jack Gay was no complete reinvention; his past followed him in exile. The Gays accepted \textit{Wiedergutmachung} money, which relieved him of much of the burden to assist his parents. He got five thousand marks for delayed education. Although Gay doubled courses and completed his undergraduate work in three years, he was twenty-three when he received his Bachelor’s. Feelings of revenge remained his main tie to Germany, especially when he observed his father’s struggles to provide for his family: “He wanted me to study, but I couldn’t because he could not take care of me.”\textsuperscript{124} In the 1950s, his father’s health faltered. To Gay, true to the “melodramatic” turns life often takes, it was plain that his father who had saved his family and loved America, died of a “broken heart”: “I suffer with him as I speak.”\textsuperscript{125}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[121] Gay, “Que es ‘Lo Novo’”.
\item[122] “Letter of Robert R. Beffie to Gay”, 30 August 1948; Peter Gay Collections; Box 17.1, Unprocessed.
\item[123] Gay, \textit{My German Question}, 192.
\item[125] Ibidem.
\end{footnotes}
During and after the war, widespread American anti-Semitism fuelled Gay’s early comparative approach to fascism, as well. Just after the American victory, he did not signal a complete break with the war years, or even between Europe and liberal America in his paper about the “Spanish Mein Kampf”: “Not that it is great literature or that it contains good ideas, but we can understand our own home-grown Fascists better if we know just what the Fascists thinkers abroad have said and written.” George Mosse noted about his first experiences in the United States: “I remember well the shock I received when, shortly after emigrating to the United States in 1939, my family was told that we could not go to our chosen vacation spot because it was ‘restricted’. And when I wanted to enter the graduate school of my choice I was told that the Jewish quota was full.” The decline of anti-Semitism after 1945 was less rapid than has often been understood. Nevertheless, Mosse and Gay entered American academia when the universities slowly abandoned the Jewish quota. In Denver Gay was already confident enough to acknowledge both American anti-Semitism and his Jewish background. In one of the episodes of “The Gay Outlook”, he compared his own position to that of a black girl, who had caused an uproar when she had been accepted by a sorority of the University of Vermont: “Since I had the misfortune of being born in the ‘wrong’ bed, I am of ‘Semitic blood’ and could therefore never join Lambda Chi or Sig Alpha or any other such group.” He even felt the need to explain “Jewish” behavior to his fellow American students: Jews were often so “clannish”, not because of any intrinsic need but because others often excluded them from society.

Gay’s Jewish background became more explicitly controversial in New York, where his rise in American academia was set in the context of the larger émigré community. At the end of the 1940s, Columbia College was presided over by Nicholas Murray Butler, a “closet-anti-Semite”, as Stern observed. At Columbia, a longstanding veneration of German culture and a clubby “genteel” anti-

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126 Gay, “Que es ‘Lo Novo’”.
127 Mosse, Confronting History, 76.
128 Hasia R. Diner, We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust 1945-62 (New York, 2009) 9. In the 1970s, Stern revealed that his fear of anti-Semitism endured: “There is general agreement that the violence of the student movement has already contributed greatly to a push to the right.” Stern added that the dominant presence of Jews among the extremists had already led to stereotyping. He even pointed to the influence of “black anti-Semitism”. “Reflections on the International Student Movement”, The American Scholar, Vol. 40, No.1 (Winter, 1970-71) 133.
129 Gay, “The Gay Outlook”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1; Unprocessed.
130 Stern, Five Germany’s I Have Known, 162.
Semitism had shaped its response to the rise of Nazism. In the 1940s and 1950s, Columbia had many Jewish students, but hardly any Jewish teachers. When senator Joseph McCarthy’s witch hunt hit American academia, American Jews were feeling uneasy by the attempts of the House Un-American Activities Committee to find communists in public life. The execution in 1953 of the Jewish “traitors” Julius and Ethel Rosenberg caused an outrage. Anti-Semitic propaganda showing a link between revolutionaries and Jews frequently occurred at the time. In 1947, just after Gay had started to teach a part of a course on American government, he heard one of his senior colleagues commenting that “it might be very well for a refugee to teach comparative government, but he had doubts about that kind of person teaching American government”. In 1955, the Department of Government and Law was to promote one person and did not choose Gay. Only much later in a lecture at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, Gay suggested anti-Semitism as a reason, although at the time it were his friends who suggested this: “there was something highly unfair in the department's choice”. Indeed, his promoted competitor was not destined to have a glorious academic career. But always careful to indicate historical ambivalence, he added to his account that his departmental chairman refused to accept his resignation; he told him that he would be a member of the department “until he found another, and a good post, elsewhere”. In the United States, signals were mixed as well.

Not only anti-Semitism, but also American-born Jews added to Gay's discomfort in the United States. Stern noted about his own problematic relationship to American Jewry: “Certainly, I encountered subterranean anti-Semitism in America, but the occasional taunt made by American Jews about my having been born into a converted family hurts more.” Still in Denver, Gay was attacked by Robert S. Gamzey, a journalist of a American-Jewish paper in 1944. In the paper, Pothoff mentioned his experience with “a brilliant young refugee from Hitlerism, who is making a splendid record in college. This Jewish youth, whose identity would surprise many people, is very close to the

132 Anderson, 29.
133 Gay, “Reflections on Hitler’s Refugees in the United States”, 120.
134 Idem., 121.
135 Stern, Five Germany’s I Have Known, 187.
Christ Methodist Church, participating in its youth activities.” Gamzey condemned Gay’s attraction to these Christians:

“I can’t understand how a Jew, who goes through the searing experience of living in Nazi Germany, can take such an attitude. Here in America, thousands of miles away from Germany, the mere reading about Hitler’s atrocities has shaken Jewry to its roots, drawn Jewish people together and brought both a religious awakening and a swelling of organizational membership as we seek the comfort of strength in numbers.”

Denver’s Jewish fraternity seemed further from Gay’s bed than the Methodist Church: “I was too poor, and not Jewish enough, to even think of joining it.” His joining a Christian youth group felt more “natural”. At the end of the 1940s, however, Stern and Gay associated with some American-born Jewish intellectuals in New York. They became part of the “West Side Kibbutz,” a group of American scholar-friends including Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, Lionel Trilling, Irving Kristol and Walter Metzger. Like the two younger émigrés, these intellectuals were not so much drawn to Germany by personal ties, which contributed to anti-German sentiments. In 1974, Hofstadter wrote to Gay, who was in Germany at the time: “When I think back to my war-time encounters in Germany, I cannot understand how a Jew could return; and it must be deeply complex.” By the 1970s, Gay himself had partly recovered some personal connections to the country that he had earlier thought to be irrevocably lost.

In spite of Gay’s often problematic relations with all kinds of Jewish émigré and American-born groups in the United States, he benefitted from the new social possibilities for Jews in the United States. Although anti-Semitism remained pervasive, after 1945 universities opened their doors to an unprecedented number of young Jewish Americans. The educational system exempted immigrant Jewish children from paying tuition and Jewish refugees massively attended the City Colleges. Jews now became established members of the postwar intellectual elite. Leading public intellectuals of the

136 Robert S. Gamzey, “Article”, Intermountain Jewish News, 3 November 1944; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1; Unprocessed.
137 Gay, “Address of the Class of ’46”.
139 “Letter of Richard Hofstadter to Gay”, 3 November 1974; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2.2.
1950s, among whom Gay’s and Stern’s friends Daniel Bell, Hofstadter, Daniel Riesman and Seymour Martin Lipset, were all of Jewish descent. In 1948, Lionel Trilling became the first Jewish professor (of English literature) at Columbia.

Germany in the West

Very soon after the Second World War, Gay’s contacts to both American and émigré intellectuals encouraged his ability to see postwar Germany as part of western culture. Abandoning his idealization of the United States, he encountered the “good Germany” in New York. But he would never completely adopt his father’s point of view, which originated in a world that had largely vanished. His own moderate views had to be built on the ruins of the war.

In spite of his struggles, Gay’s political commitment in the first period after the Second World War was more hopeful than it would ever be: “We were no cynics, instead we were idealists.” He shared this attitude with many other émigrés, who delighted in this absorbing moment of victory. Most of all, their optimism was fuelled by an admiration for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. When on 12 April 1945, the news came out that FDR had died, Gay found his mother crying when he returned home. Nevertheless, “we expected that the world would continue what he had begun”. He wrote passionately in the student paper Denver Clarion: “His passing marks the end of an era; there is little we can do but carry on in his spirit; there is little we can say but: ‘We will never forget you, Mr. Roosevelt.’” In 1972, he wrote the United States a thank you-note in his essay “At Home in America”: “For me Roosevelt’s America was in every respect what Hitler’s Germany was not: a land of justice and freedom.”

Later, Gay happily returned to this postwar moment of hope: “The dropping of the atom bombs between our junior and senior year, only underscored our sense of urgency about the most radical renewal everywhere, including our United States itself.”

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140 Ibidem.
142 “Clipping of The Denver Clarion”, 20 April 1945; Peter Gay Papers; Box 22.
144 Gay, “Address of the Class of ’46”.
shared in “The Gay Outlook”: “I had strong opinions built on sand, but nobody stopped me.” Above all, he advocated America’s international role: “What we do has a profound effect on the rest of the world.” On 25 January 1946, the foundation of the United Nations represented the “hope of mankind”. He and his fellow students followed the making of the United Nations breathlessly: “At the end, we must do what Wilson had failed to realize: to make a peace that would be just and lasting.” He volunteered for the American Association for the UN in New York. In another column, he resolved to declare his belief in man’s future: thinking will “come slowly and painfully”. But progress was not impossible “if we show enough determination and good will to change in the right direction”. These columns anticipated the belief in gradual change that he would come to advocate in his historical work.

At Columbia University, Gay continued to be an excellent student. In 1946, he won a Pi Gamma Mu Award for outstanding work in the Social Sciences Department and a scholarship to teach a year after his arrival. From July 1947 to 1953, he was appointed lecturer in Public Law and Government, earning 800 dollars a year. On Tuesday 29 May 1948, he took his orals in political theory and American government, his minor field, at Columbia’s Fayerweather Hall. He wanted to spare his parents the nervousness he felt, when he decided to take his orals half a year earlier without their knowledge. Victorious, he faithfully reported all his achievements: “I did a lot of reading, much more than I was asked to cover, of course.” With a fine sense of drama, he described his examination: “Of course, the exam was considered every bit as difficult as I described to you. Many, many candidates have failed them, and don’t forget that I took this exam after only two years of graduate work—the very least of time in which it may be taken by anyone.” The day before his orals he stopped reviewing his notes and went home to listen to a baseball game. In the morning he played a Beethoven sonata, after which he took an “excellent oral examination,” as one of his professors told him. He described all his examiners to his parents, among whom the British scholar Robert Morisson MacIver (“probably the best-known political philosopher in the U.S.. I’ve been to his house twice.”) and Franz Neumann,

145 Gay, “The Gay Outlook”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1; Unprocessed.
147 Gay, My German Question, 13.
148 Gay, “Letter to his Parents”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1; Unprocessed.
the later supervisor of his dissertation: “I was scared of him, since he was the great specialist in Marxism, as well as many other important fields.” He had never taken a course with Neumann or met him before: “He seemed cold to me, during the interview, but did suggest about a dozen of books that I ought to read, and these books turned out to be most significant. Possibly, without his aid I would not have read them.” One of the questions he was asked was what heads of state had contributed to political theory. He even allowed himself a joke when he called Jefferson and Adams “part-time political philosophers,” which was not a disparaging remark, but “a statement of the fact that many early American thinkers were men of action”. Neumann questioned him about the theory of dictatorship, some Aristotelian concepts, Montesquieu, but much less about Marx and Lenin than he had expected. To celebrate the results, he spent the evening with Onkel Siegfried.

Still, Gay’s personal success did not make him idealize American culture. Although his dislike for Germany initially fuelled his enthusiasm for liberalism, soon after his emigration he was ready to take a more critical stance towards the United States: “Almost from the beginning of my stay in the New World, my idealization of the US had to endure some serious jolts.”

Ironically, the German émigré’s entry into the wider world had been marked by an awareness of its restrictions. And most important, he never forgot the fate of the “St. Louis”. His experiences with National Socialism gave him a sharp eye for American injustices. In Atlanta, where he temporarily lived when he first arrived in the country, racist segregation was omnipresent: “I found segregated entrances on streetcars, segregated drinking fountains, segregated movie houses, and all the rest of legal discrimination.” Later he noted that his observations were not broadly shared: “None of my family and some of my new friends with whom I discussed the facts that confronted me everywhere, saw any way out of this strictly segregated society. It had always been that way and would always be that way.”

So Gay never completely contrasted American and German culture, as many Americans and many other emigrés did at the time. In July 1945, he claimed: “We cannot kid ourselves in believing that fascism is gone, just because we have beaten the Nazis. It is still alive all over the world.”

149 Gay, My German Question, 158
150 Gay, “Reflections on Hitler’s Refugees in the United States”, 120.
151 Idem., 119.
152 Ibidem.
did not single out a distinct fascist German tradition, but set out to “give a picture of the mind of the so-called fascist intellectual, as well as to compare Spanish fascism with German and Italian diseases of the same type”. Already in Denver, he was aware that the rise of fascism was not merely caused by the “irrational” masses, but also connected to “rational” intellectuals. He would only later develop his interest in Freud, but initially his reading of pragmatist philosophers compelled him to observe historical continuity especially on a psychological level. Although he would become known for the construction of cultural continuity in his historical work, Gay, and other second-generation émigré historians such as Mosse and Stern, rejected the rigid version of the German Sonderweg thesis that was widespread in the United States. This thesis observed a clear cultural thread in German history that resulted in the rise of National Socialism and the Holocaust. Stern wrote in his memoirs that the thesis of the Sonderweg just “seemed puerile and wrongheaded” at the time.\footnote{Stern, \textit{Five Germany’s I Have Known}, 165.}

It is remarkable that the young émigré managed to let reason win in such matters, publicly at least. Although he had a little earlier defended Germany’s partition, in “The Gay Outlook” he advocated the restoring of the Ruhr economy, laying aside any personal emotions: “Although this could be the center of a war machine: it is vital to European recovery. Only an economically united Europe can be a healthy Europe.”\footnote{Gay, “The Gay Outlook”, undated.} As we will see, his pragmatic stance would become significant in view of the ideological disasters of the twentieth century. He presented himself as a moderate liberal, generally not a preferred role for a young intellectual. During the United Nations Conference in San Francisco, which took place from 25 April 1945 to 26 June 1946, Gay wrote: “Much heat will be generated for a while, and the wisest attitude for us to adopt, therefore, is to wait and hope, and to refrain from jumping to hasty conclusions.”\footnote{Ibidem.} A description of Gay in the magazine \textit{World Union} of the Institute of World Affairs, did not betray a radical either: the participant in its activities was a “Free Thinker and Naturalist”, an enthusiastic exploiter of the phrase “I was wondering” and a “master
of understatement”. Gay was also famous among his fellow students for his “subtle sense of humor” and “unostentatious wisdom”.156

Gay’s moderation and his German-American perspective did not demonize socialism and communism. Even when tensions with the Soviet-Union rose, he advocated a dialogue with the other super power. Although he would become a strong supporter of the “liberal” Enlightenment during the early Cold War, he did not draw a sharp line between a politically correct West and the ideological enemy, which surfaced when the student advised the American government on the fascist regime in Spain in “The Gay Outlook”: “A tough policy toward Spain now would help to erase a blot on our foreign policy record of the ’thirties. It will be remembered that we refused to aid the Loyalists during the fascist rebellion and thus indirectly boosted Franco into power.”157 He encouraged an economic boycott of Spain, because an alliance with the country would close the door to negotiations with Russia: a “cooperation that is vital and possible in spite of Russia’s recent strange unilateral actions”.158 Quite optimistically, he believed that Stalin’s Russia would endorse a free Poland after the war. He criticized Truman’s containment policy, which reflected the President’s refusal to keep the channels of communication open and to harden his stance towards the Soviet Union. He stressed that although most Americans support the Chinese non-communist Kuomintang, “communists have instituted social and economic democracy in their regions and have eliminated corruption”.159 Taking a stance against radicalism, he dismissed a political position that was too rooted in static principles and inflexibility. The shadow of past and impending wars continued to endow his moderation and cosmopolitanism with an urgent undertone.

Gay’s moderation was also visible in his stance towards Germany, fuelled by his experiences in the United States. While he experienced American anti-Semitism during his early rise in American academia, he mitigated his views on German culture: “For a few years I would not even read German until 1946, when I went to graduate school.”160 While his ties with West Germany would take some

156 “World Union” published by the Institute of World Affairs, 1945; Peter Gay Papers; MS#0474; Box 23; Unprocessed.
158 Gay, “Que es ‘Lo Novo”.
160 Ibidem.
time to materialize\textsuperscript{161}, his contacts to both American and first-generation émigré intellectuals in New York were instrumental in his slow and only partial rapprochement to German culture in exile. His German-Jewish background allowed him access to these networks. It was the exiled, often leftist and Jewish Germany that Gay encountered. He later noted that his awareness of the achievements of Weimar culture expanded after he was admitted to Columbia University. At Columbia, he became attracted to a new type of intellectual that had emerged at the Office of Strategic Service (OSS), an American intelligence service that was the forerunner of the CIA. During the war, the American government recruited German social scientists and historians such as Neumann, Hajo Holborn, Felix Gilbert, and American historians specialized in German history to provide background information about the enemy. Émigrés’ intimate perspective on German culture animated these discussions with a new sense of urgency. They shared a deep involvement in the tragedy of recent German history as well as its Nachleben in postwar transatlantic relations. When the Cold War emerged, many of the intellectual networks that had been developed during the Second World War were consolidated and perpetuated.\textsuperscript{162} After the war, former OSS-members became an influential force in American academia. Leonard Krieger called these historians the “one identifiable cohesive group”\textsuperscript{163} among American historians of Europe. Neumann attracted many future historians of modern European history at prominent universities. The intense discussions at the OSS about the rise of National Socialism became formative experiences for a generation of intellectuals in the United States.\textsuperscript{164} Together with his colleagues of the Frankfurt School such as Herbert Marcuse and the lawyer and political scientist Otto Kirchheimer, Neumann collected a circle of young American historians among them Leonard Krieger, H. Stuart Hughes, Carl Schorske and Franklin L. Ford. This seminar lasted until the late 1950s.\textsuperscript{165}

\textsuperscript{161} Gay’s postwar relationship to German culture and the Germans was definitely long-distance. He would visit Germany for the first time in 1961, an agonizing experience; it took him until the 1970s to regain a sense of familiarity with the country.


\textsuperscript{164} Barry M. Katz, “German Historians in the Office of Strategic Studies”, Lehmann and Sheehan, \textit{An Interrupted Past}, 136-139, 139.

\textsuperscript{165} Stuart Hughes, “Franz Neumann: Between Marxism and Liberal Democracy”, 460.
Although Gay was too young to join the OSS, he could still sense its atmosphere when he joined Neumann’s seminar on European politics at Columbia. Stern was appointed reporter of the seminar. In his memoirs, Stern recalls his fascination for the style and meaning in which its participants analyzed contemporary politics. Too young or unable to fight the Nazis during the war, the OSS connected these second-generation émigrés to the American war effort: “Sometimes I say that I wished for a ‘Peacetime Equivalent of the OSS’—the formulation referring to one of my favorite essays, William James’ ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’, that quintessential American text of 1906, arguing that modern war is suicidal but that the civic and human virtues mobilized by war needed to be enlisted in collective peacetime pursuits.” Neumann’s seminar also attracted many scholars from other universities, safeguarding the dialogue between émigré and American scholars. Other initiatives as the School for International Affairs and various regional institutes established Columbia in the late 1940s as a center of international discourse for American academia.

Neumann represented in many ways the successful scholar that Gay came to model himself after: critically attached to both Germany and the United States. German émigré intellectuals such as Neumann helped him to navigate German history in polarized postwar-America. Neumann was not Jewish, but had to flee from the Nazis because of his work for the German social democrats. He had been part of the Frankfurt School of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, which became affiliated to Columbia University in the 1930s. In 1948 he returned to Columbia as a professor of political science: “The very presence of Neumann in the political science department was evidence that Columbia University was beginning to cream off the top ranks of scholars among Hitler’s victims to add to their faculties.” Gay admired his supervisor’s determination to continue working in American academia after the war. Neumann believed that the intellectual émigré could chose from three different points of view regarding his new homeland: first, to abandon his previous position and accept the new orientation completely; second, to retain his thought structure in the hope of “revamping the American pattern” or withdrawing on his own island; third, to attempt integrating his own experiences with

166 Stern, 192.
traditional views: “This, I believe, is the most difficult, but also the most rewarding, solution.”¹⁶⁹ As we have seen, Gay concurred with the third option. Until 1942 Neumann worked on *Behemoth. The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*, one of the first scholarly analyses of National Socialism, which established him as one of the leading scholars of German history. This book made Neumann the founder of *Zeitgeschichte*.¹⁷⁰ While many other émigrés idealized the United States, Gay agreed with Neumann that National Socialism was not a uniquely German phenomenon. Although he had already developed this idea in Denver, as we will see his contacts with Neumann and others provided his views on Germany with a more intellectual framework.

Another German émigré and OSS-member who played an important role in the internationalization of American academia was Hajo Holborn. American and German postwar scholarship were first bridged by Holborn, often considered to be the “dean” of German studies. Yale’s Sterling Professor of History, a position that Gay would later take, had emigrated to the United States as early as 1923. Holborn’s views were shaped by a firm belief in liberal democracy, which was illustrated by his refusal to return to Germany after the war; he was convinced that his experiences in the United States had turned him into an American.¹⁷¹ Like Neumann, he did offer to help rebuilding German historical scholarship. His position in American academia allowed him to take up this mediating position between Washington and Bonn during the first years of the Republic.¹⁷² As advisor of the State Department on Occupation Affairs, Holborn had an important role in the formation and execution of postwar American policies toward Germany. In 1967, he would become the first president of the American Historical Association not born in the United States.

Next to émigré intellectuals, American scholars influenced Gay’s more nuanced perceptions of German culture, notably through the inclusive concept of western culture. As early as 1917, a course on Contemporary Civilization at Columbia had been initiated to lay out the concept of western culture.

This Columbia course became a model for many other universities. The idea of the West, presented to students in Western Civilization courses, was from the outset interdisciplinary, dealing with history, literature, philosophy and politics. In the early Cold War, Western Civ served to communicate “western” ideology and to mobilize students. Its aim was to arm students against communist propaganda and to encourage transatlantic understanding. But even before the institutionalization of Western Civ, American research into European history distinguished itself through its supra-national perspective, “European History” is, after all, an American invention. An interdisciplinary approach had been adopted much earlier than in any European country and was much admired abroad as a “true American specialty”. Eventually, the notion of the “West” became a central idea in American thought and education.

During the Second World War, the ideal of a transatlantic West also defined the discussions between American and émigré intellectuals in the OSS. American OSS-members with whom Gay became friends were the historians Henry Roberts, Henry A. Turner Jr. and Richard Hofstadter. He explained his attraction to Roberts and Hofstadter by “their capacity to generate an atmosphere of intense political seriousness, made up of a capacity for enthusiastic engagement, free-swinging criticism, and fine discriminations”. Turner, one of the first American historians of the postwar era to work in German archives, visited Germany after the war much earlier than Gay did.

In the catastrophic context of the time, the study of Western culture was not without significance. In his memoirs, Stern states: “We were studying the history and classics of the very civilization that was being threatened by a Germany that spiritually repudiated all that the West stood for, though Germans had mastered the West’s scientific and technological advances.” Hofstadter agreed: “To those who are interested in the survival of democracy, it is probably more important to see American democracy as a part of western European democracy than it is to stress its uniqueness.”

The rise of National Socialism had made many western traditions suspect or showed them to be

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173 Allardyse, “The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course”, 695.
177 Stern, 163.
178 Hofstadter, quoted in Novick, That Noble Dream, 311.
ineffective. The American need for in-depth knowledge of European and German intellectual and
cultural traditions is reflected by his teaching of “Western Civ” in American Government a year after
his admission to Columbia, together with a course that he considered “his specialty”: the history of
political thought in his so-called “from Plato to Nato” course. Teaching these courses further
stimulated his comparative perspective on European and American intellectual traditions.

**A Moderate Liberal**

Like many other émigré and American intellectuals, Gay’s leftist political position altered at the
beginning of the Cold War, albeit not so radically. About his first time in the United States, he later
noted: “I was a socialist.” Denver University had, according to Gay, preserved his leftist beliefs
longer than if he would have departed for New York immediately: “The political sagacity that students
in New York, say, had been forced to develop, their encounter with Communists and the Communist
party line, was quite lacking at D.U., and I make no claim to having been wiser than the rest. We were
not experienced enough to recognize that the slogan, ‘No enemies to the left,’ was hollow, even
fraudulent.” His teachers were not helpful in shedding his “innocent—shall I say naive?—perspective
on the world. Dr. Woolbert was a brilliant eccentric and quite unabashedly leftist political scientist,
but when they discussed something in class that was very simple, he would say: ‘This is so simple that
a Republican can understand it.’” He would later reject this as “naked partisanship that foreclosed our
understanding of major issues”.

During the war and in the first period after it, Gay’s commitment to socialism was inspired by
English revolutionary traditions. England took up a significant position in his political imagination,
because it alone had withstood the Nazis and formed a clear link between continental Europe and the
liberal United States. The student claimed that fascism “is not opposed to capitalism, it is one of its
forms”; fascism was an “essentially conservative revolution […]”. This does not mean that capitalism

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1-19, 2.
180 Interview with the author, 12 April 2009.
181 Gay, “Address of the Class of ’46”.
brought about fascism, but when in power fascism falls back on an age old conservatism.”¹⁸² After Roosevelt’s death in 1945, European socialist movements reassured him that veering to the left did not always lead to communist suppression. Displaying the scale of his rhetorical talent, Gay urged his American public to continue the social politics of reform that Roosevelt had started. He seemed to address a much broader public than his professor alone: “We are conquering the Caesars today, but in the very flush of victory we realize that we have learnt nothing: we have brought the chances to build a new world at a terrific cost in blood and suffering, but while the shouts of victory still ring in our ears, we blithely go toward destruction, refusing to recognize the end of the radical reconstruction.”¹⁸³ While the New Deal was often contested, European socialism continued to be a source of inspiration. In 1946, he had endeavored to find a teaching job in England, but Columbia’s international Office advised him to stay home because of the lack of food and housing in the war-torn country.¹⁸⁴ His ongoing admiration for England was reflected by his initial plan to write his dissertation about the English Fabian Socialist Graham Wallas (1858-1932). But when he was still in the first stages of his research, Sigmund Neumann notified him that this subject had already been taken up by another Ph.D. student at Yale.¹⁸⁵

Gay’s interest in Fabian socialism led to membership of Progressive Citizens of America. The PCA attacked President Truman’s escalating the Cold War and supported America’s new third party leader Henry Wallace during the elections of 1948 and the much-admired mayor of New York, Fiorello LaGuardia. He supported Wallace mainly because he perceived his policies to link up with Roosevelt’s New Deal Politics. When the Cold War accelerated, Wallace was considered an alternative to the Cold War.¹⁸⁶ Gay even wrote his Master’s Thesis on the Fabian Society: “The Thought of Fabian Socialists on International affairs” (1947). In his thesis, he described Fabian Socialists’ growing emphasis on international affairs from their foundation in 1884 to the Second

¹⁸² Ibidem.
¹⁸³ “Que es: ‘Lo Novo’”.
¹⁸⁴ “Letter of the International Office of Columbia University to Gay”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1; Unprocessed.
¹⁸⁵ Sigmund Neumann, “Letter to Gay”, 10 March 1949; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1.
World War, recognizing their correlation with domestic issues. The philosophical icons of The Fabian Society were Darwin, Positivism, Henry George, John Stuart Mill, Robert Own, Karl Marx, Hyndman’s Democratic Federation, and Christian Socialism. Although Gay would soon abandon positivism and socialism, while he never really believed in Christianity, many aspects of his later defense of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* were already present in his account of the Fabian Socialists. He particularly liked their belief in gradual change, their eye for practical reality and their talent for informed propaganda, rooted in scientific research: “Diligent research, adult propaganda, occasionally effective permeation, based on principles of social justice and carried out with loyal support of outstanding figures such as the [Sidney and Beatrice] Webbs and [Bernard] Shaw, were the basic reasons for the importance of the Fabian society.”

Moreover, the Fabianists recruited most of their members among the middle classes, while under Bernard Shaw it had abandoned Marx’ emphasis on class struggle. Insistence on scientific inquiry and factual information led the Fabians to steer away from utopianism and anarchism towards constitutionalism.

Gay’s own socialist sympathies at the time were clearly stated: “Capitalism, with its emphasis on private property creates poverty amidst plenty and proclaims that nothing can be done about this contradiction. The fact is that the contradiction of poverty and plenty is inherent in Capitalism, and is not natural.”

He analyzed the conflict between the Fabians’ ideological stance and their practical concerns. For example, during the Second Boer War (1899-1902), their anti-imperialism, which advocated African country’s self-government, clashed with their efforts to preserve institutional unity. In view of the later criticism he received from the New Left in the 1960s, which condemned his “conservative” views, it is interesting to see that Gay made sure to refer to Africans’ own stance in this matter: “The idea that a foreign government may actually rule in the interest of the natives seems to most Africans somewhat ludicrous.” When international tensions heated up in the 1930s, which Gay described with remarkable distance, the Fabians had developed a fully international outlook and they had become an influential force in English politics. At the beginning of the early Cold War, his main

188 Gay, “The Thought of Fabian Socialists on International Affairs”, 16-17.
189 Idem., 65.
concern appeared to be the prevention of two power blocs, the Soviet Union and the United States:

“Whether to continue the present course, close American-English collaboration, or whether to steer a more independent course – a course that would take the British closer to the Soviet Union – is a question that must be decided by the best minds in Great Britain, and the Fabian Society will have a part to play.”\(^{190}\) At the end of his thesis, he holds up The Fabian Society as a hopeful force in re-establishing international peace.

In 1948, however, Gay canceled his membership of the Progressive Citizens of America when Wallace rejected the Marshall plan. Wallace saw this simply as a non-military application of the Truman Doctrine.\(^ {191}\) He was overwhelmed by the emerging political and intellectual consensus of 1948, when the Marshall plan took away much of the hostility against Truman.\(^ {192}\) In an eight-page letter to the secretary of PCA, Mrs. Wisher, Gay emphasized that his decision to leave was not due to current investigations of left-wing groups: “I want to make clear that I am not quitting because I have changed my mind about the relationship that progressives should maintain vis-à-vis communists. I, as a non-Communist progressive, still believe that you can have an open organization that will not be run by the communists if you have a vigilant and intelligent non-Communist membership.”\(^ {193}\) He underlined that the cancellation of his membership did not originate in his fear of McCarthyism, but was due to that “fool” Wallace’s rejection of the Marshall Plan: the “most important single factor in world foreign relations at present”. He added: “The Marshall Plan issue is, in my opinion, even more important than settlement of the atomic bomb control plan in the United Nations.” The Marshall Plan “as visualized by the top leaders in the State Department and European experts is the last best hope of Europe. By putting Europe back on its feet, by re-establishing its stability, it will minimize the areas of danger over which a third world war could arise […]. But above all, the Marshall Plan will allow Europe to live and hope.” He was appalled by the members of the Fabian Society who considered it “a way for the western country to keep their power”.\(^ {194}\) Apparently, his support of a strong transatlantic

\(^{190}\) Idem., 133.

\(^{191}\) Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, 68.

\(^{192}\) Idem., 67 and 71.

\(^{193}\) Gay, “Letter to Mrs. Wisher,” undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 23; Unprocessed.

\(^{194}\) Interview with the author, 23 January 2009.
relationship that entailed American economic support of Europe, defined his political commitment to a larger extent than his loyalty to economic justice at home. His transatlantic views were rooted in an unswerving allegiance to the United States, induced by a wish for safety and stability to protect the world against the excess of ideology: “No liberal can question that there is a great deal wrong with our foreign policy […] But in the context of world affairs in which we are living at present, it is simply ridiculous to say that all the blame for the difficulties in which we find ourselves attaches to our country. This is not patriotism or chauvinism, it is an observation than can be substantiated by anyone who will look at the international scene.”

A German-American Perspective

After leaving the PCA, Gay continued to see the Right as the most dangerous enemy—even as the Cold War accelerated. His objections to Wallace did not involve a complete turn to the conservative side of some New York Intellectuals. These leading, often Jewish-born intellectuals of the postwar scene had gone through a phase of communist radicalism in the 1930s. When the news about Stalin’s policies came out, many of them were forced to give up their beliefs to resurface as liberals in the 1940s. These intellectuals perceived their moderate worldview generally as a defeat, a disenchantment of the world. Also an émigré intellectual such as Neumann found no real substitute for his earlier faith in socialism and economic principles. After communism had been exposed, he never resigned himself completely to the collapse of his moral and intellectual world.

Contrary to many American and émigré intellectuals, Gay’s moderation, fuelled by the awareness of ideological catastrophe at an early stage of his career, allowed him to connect views that were often divided in the heat of public debates: being loyal to the United States, giving way to a transatlantic relationship and a moderate liberalism that was inspired by European socialism. His moderation and alliance to the United States may have looked like a mere product of an overtly enthusiastic acculturation. In one of his student papers, he actually seemed to proclaim the benefits of

195 Gay, “Que es ‘Lo Novo’”.
196 Michael Kimmage, The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, And the Lessons of Anti-Communism (Rosewood City, 2009) 179.
acculturation: “Paradoxical as it may sound, self-denial is the basis of all progress and all creation.”

But while we will later return to the problem of acculturation in his thinking, it is enough for now to realize that it fuelled an outlook that was quite rare in polarized postwar-America. In his case, the ideal of acculturation that shaped his German-Jewish background, albeit radical in itself, involved a focus on rationality and moderation that now strengthened his mistrust of ideology. His early pragmatist views were cultivated at the university. There, he found a community based on a rationality that represented in some ways the values of reason and secularism of his German-Jewish upbringing. The academic community became more than just a professional space: its rational outlook was an antidote against devastating ideology.

It helped Gay to develop his moderate views that at the time of his emigration, he was young enough to integrate various, often conflicting aspects of his particular experience of emigration into his thought. While many older émigré intellectuals remained culturally attached to Germany, his linguistic capabilities, his experience of the “real” America, his American education and his access to networks of émigré and American intellectuals established his critical insider perspective on both American and German culture. The idea of western culture allowed him to relate Germany to the United States in more complex ways, while his own experiences with National Socialism, the news of the Holocaust and thankfulness to the United States prevented a moral relativism. Yet, a mitigation of his attitudes towards parts of German history did definitely not imply a complete reconciliation. His contempt for Germany and the Germans led him to closely watch other émigré intellectuals in the United States. Not only intellectuals’ thinking, but also their experiences and attitudes towards both countries mattered in the development of Gay’s intellectual orientation. The rise of National Socialism did not induce some German émigré intellectuals, such as the conservative historian Hans Rothfels, to question their German nationalism. Gay fiercely dismissed such lack of effort to integrate into society and their contempt for American culture. In Washington Heights, a borough in New York, émigrés who clustered together were called “Das Vierte Reich”: “The few critics of the immigrants

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198 Gay, “Que es ‘Lo Novo’”.
who raised doubts about the contributions of newcomers to American culture had a point.\textsuperscript{200} Thus Gay’s support of transatlantic exchange was not uncritical.

Moreover, Gay’s close relations with older émigrés did not stop him from avoiding Germany during his trips to Europe. In this respect he was more determined than other second-generation émigrés such as Mosse and Stern, who returned in respectively 1947 and 1954. He even clashed on the subject with his supervisor Neumann. Gay starts his memoirs with a conversation he had with Neumann after the Weimar scholar had defended the thesis that the Germans were the least anti-Semitic people in Europe during a class session. He confronted Neumann at the Columbia Faculty Club: “How can you be so sentimental?” To which Neumann’s replied: “How can you be so sentimental?”\textsuperscript{201} It was often a little less burdensome for the older émigré generation to visit Germany after the war. His parents had connections, attachments to places and had commitments, like his father’s football club, to go back to. In his memoirs, \textit{A European Past} (1988), the German historian Felix Gilbert focuses on his return to Germany as a member of the OSS after 1945. Gilbert had emigrated to the United States in 1933, aged 28, which allowed him after the war to reach out to the many friends and colleagues he had known before the war, such as Theodor Heuss and Karl Jaspers. Although Gilbert was determined not to stay in Germany, these connections specified and justified his preoccupation with Germany: “I felt a strong interest […], in learning what had happened to people I had known–in part out of curiosity, but also to help if friends were in straitened circumstances and finally to test my own reaction to the reemergence of the past.”\textsuperscript{202} Contrary to Gilbert’s, Gay’s relationship to Germany, although in many ways as intense, was much harder to pin down. He did not have friends or connections from the past to help him to rise above the experience of National Socialism.

Stern’s hometown Breslau wasn’t even German anymore, but he understood Neumann’s position better than Gay: “a return would have given him a political forum, and a way to help build up German democracy.”\textsuperscript{203} In 1954, Neumann asked Stern to join him while teaching the summer

\textsuperscript{200} Gay, \textit{“At Home in America”}, 119.
\textsuperscript{201} Gay, \textit{My German Question}, 4.
\textsuperscript{203} Stern, \textit{Five Germany’s I Have Known}, 216.
semester at the Freie Universität in Berlin. Neumann would be teaching the course “The European Crisis, 1890-1950, with particular attention to America’s role” Afterwards Stern stated the beneficial effect of his visit to Germany in a piece for Commentary in 1955: “My own hatred did not survive my proximity to the Germans; I left Germany in August purged of hatred—though not disloyal to the feelings of the past, and full of forebodings to the future.” Gay, on the other hand, kept his distance both geographically and mentally. He would first return to Europe in the Summer of 1950, but refused to cross the border with Germany—even though Neumann had told him about a private library with material on the subject of his dissertation, the social democrat Eduard Bernstein, in Berlin.

204 Idem., 210.
206 Stuart Hughes agreed that Neumann has been generous “to a fault” in his judgments on the ordinary German during the Third Reich. The Sea Change, 108.
Chapter II:

American “Lessons" from German History

Introduction:

Peter Gay felt at home in the turbulent transatlantic period after the war. The fresh awareness of the relevance of European history for the United States energized his scholarly career. His comparative perspective, to which his views on Germany and the United States were thoroughly tied, reflected wider transatlantic connections. Before the Second World War, American historians had often considered European history exclusively a pre-history of the United States. Historians either proclaimed how the two were converting or how similar they were. But now the postwar reconstruction of a common western civilization demanded a new approach. As the United States emerged from the war as winner and world power, it also became an intrinsic part of the West, designed to tie Europe and the United States together both politically and culturally. In his presidential address at the American Historical Association’s annual convention in 1954, Carlton J. Hayes, called for a significant role for European history. National Socialism and the Second World War fuelled American scholars’ need “to research the history of Germany, Europe, and East Asia—and to utilize the expertise of refugees”.209

Both Germany and the United States reconsidered their ties to the West. While American scholars were challenged by the search for a national identity as part of a transatlantic, western culture at the beginning of the Cold War, German scholars faced the burden of the Nazi past in West Germany’s attempt to reintegrate into the West. This shared search for a yet in many ways undefined West, on which “liberal” Americans and “ideological” Germans embarked from opposite sides, catapulted the German-American relationship to the center of the debate about its identity. There was

an urgent demand to find explanations and analytical categories that could explain the rise of “German ideology” and “the failure of illiberalism”. Historians now agreed that American history should be studied within the context of the transatlantic relationship. As part of intellectual networks that consisted of both émigrés and Americans, Gay was in the middle of the revaluation of German and American history and culture in the United States. In New York, the disillusionment among many American and German émigré intellectuals about Marxism, together with their Jewish background, made them especially receptive to the significance of the ill-fated democratic experiment in the Weimar Republic for the present. Weimar intellectuals confronted similar threats of ideology that American intellectuals debated after the Second World War. Both Weimar and American intellectuals dealt with the problem of how to establish a democratic national identity as part of western culture.

Central to this chapter is Gay’s journey as a scholar at Columbia University during the early Cold War at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. It examines the degree to which he found a model for postwar western culture in the German socialist Eduard Bernstein. His dissertation, which appeared in 1952, was re-published once in 1961, and it has never received much attention in comparison to his later work on the Enlightenment, German-Jewish history and the bourgeoisie. Still, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein’s Challenge to Marx* significantly caught a scholar in transformation, wrestling with issues that would demarcate his whole academic career. His intellectual endeavor was shaped by the question of the relationship between ideas and reality. How to stimulate a liberal élan that did not lapse into “unworldly” ideological thinking? In the course of the 1950s, however, the rise of McCarthyism would again transform the German-American imagination. Postwar American propaganda about the hated enemy was now partly replaced by intellectuals’ parallels between German and American culture. Fritz Stern noticed the intensification in the demand for “lessons” from Europe during McCarthyism: “This discontent may be a new experience for America, but it is an old and tragic affliction for Europe.” Soon after he finished his dissertation, Gay was forced to rewrite his narrative of western culture.

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212 Greenberg, 21.
Theoretical Explorations

Gay’s dissertation formed an important stage in his increasing but partial embrace of German intellectual traditions that molded his idea of western culture. In the case of some American historians, an aversion to theory rooted in the conviction that theoretical construction was more the practice of European historians. In his article about American historiography in 1952, Mosse stated that liberal historians did not understand ideology and that the theory of history was generally neglected. The “typical European interest” in theory was often considered “un-American;” there was a widespread belief in the contradiction between “unspoiled” American culture and “ideological” European culture. Mosse claimed that Americans “pride themselves on the absence of political ideologies [...], they believe that they are formed by the landscape and general environment without theorizing. [...] It is essentially the praise of the USA as anti-intellectual Nation.”214 In the United States, literary criticism had, with an eye to Europe, adopted a much more theoretical basis than historical research. Although émigrés stimulated theoretical discourse among American historians215, in 1962 John Higham still claimed about the state of theory in American academia: “It remains true, however that the major works of this kind are still written mostly by literary and cultural critics.”216

Already in Denver, away from the émigré center in New York, Gay’s absorption of American culture involved a precocious interest in philosophy. His student papers reveal how focused he was on the American progressive tradition with its hopeful outlook and belief in social change. American pragmatists further stimulated his attention to people’s motives, their consciousness and the workings of the mind. In a paper about Plato in 1943 for a course on the philosophy of religion, he explored the relationship between experience, ideas and ideology: “Plato’s dualistic metaphysical system was, in all likelihood, due to intensely personal factors. Plato became a sort of focalizing point for his experiences, his learning, his successes and frustrations. Had he been ‘tough-minded’ rather than ‘tender-minded’ (to borrow a Jamesian expression) his metaphysics would be different.”217 Gay

214 George Mosse, “The Pragmatism of the Freshman History Course”, Social Studies for Teachers and Administrators; George L. Mosse Collection; AR 25137; Box 48; Folder 8; Leo Baeck Institute.
217 Gay, “Plato’s Metaphysics”, 1943; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1; Unprocessed.
pointed here to the distinction of the philosopher William James between the “tough-minded” mentality, which favored empiricism, pessimism and skepticism, and the “tender-minded” mentality that embraced ideals, religion and optimism. His preference for the tough-minded mentality anticipated his later support of the eighteenth-century philosophers’ thinking.

At Columbia, progressive theory shaped much of scholars’ thinking in the 1940s, as one scholar noted: “That amalgam of pragmatism, democracy and social radicalism that James Harvey Robinson, Charles Beard and John Dewey had injected into Columbia’s university culture.” Dewey pointed to the ever changing nature of reality, which science was best fit to grasp, as well as the role of subjectivity in the pursuit of knowledge. Gay often referred to his philosophy of action, which suggested that man learns by experiencing the consequences of his own deeds, grounded in his willingness to accept the uncertainties of modern life and inability to achieve objective knowledge. Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct* (1924) continued to inspire Gay’s use of psychology in his work on the Enlightenment.

Moreover, the theoretical analysis of the manipulative power of the media and politics was evident in a fledgling scholar, who launched his career when massive use of propaganda unsettled static notions of “reality”. In his paper about Plato, he referred to his insights into the power of ideas when he dubbed the philosopher’s political pieces irreverently “propaganda”. Although German émigré scholars such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Leo Lowenthal had a profound bearing on American media studies, Americans themselves had started in the 1930s to investigate the effects of mass communications on the nation’s politics and psyche. The first book that Gay claims to have bought and admired in the United States, Arnold Thurman’s *The Folklore of Capitalism*, offered practical lessons of political strategy in its discussion of the position of the media in shaping political ideologies, social attitudes, and private fantasies. In 1952, Gay complained in an article, “The Big

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221 Gay, “Plato’s Metaphysics”.
222 Pells, 217.
Slicks in Politics”, about the mechanisms of the media in the campaigns of the presidential candidates Stevenson and Eisenhower.\textsuperscript{223} In a letter to \textit{The New York Times} on October 11 of the same year, he accused the paper of dedicating much more space to the Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower than to the Democrat Adlai Stevenson.\textsuperscript{224} However, he certainly did not approach politics as the exclusive domain of campaigns and manipulation, especially when it concerned his hero Roosevelt. In a review in \textit{The Nation} of a book about Roosevelt as “Master Campaigner”, he complained that in this account the “greatness” of the cherished president got lost.\textsuperscript{225}

After Gay moved to New York, his early attraction to theoretical reflection was more infused by émigré thought, which considerably raised the general level of theoretical explorations in American academia.\textsuperscript{226} About his encounters with German émigrés and their works, Gay noted: “It was not until 1946, when I moved to New York to attend graduate school to study political theory at Columbia University, that the idea of a German-Jewish legacy in my new country began to acquire some concrete outlines for me. I began to meet refugee intellectuals, read books by refugees, above all observed refugee professors at work. Not all of these were Jews, but most of them were.”\textsuperscript{227} Like other émigré intellectuals such as Stern, he noted that “it was the fruitful interchange between the newcomers –to repeat, not all of them Jewish– and their American hosts that I first witnessed and learned to value at Columbia University”.\textsuperscript{228} He made an effort here to underline that the rise of theoretical reflection in American academia was the product of German-American cooperation, instead of a manifestation of Weimar’s cultural superiority. His teaching of the Western Civilization Course together with American scholars shaped his own emphasis on culture in his scholarship: “We talked about intellectual things, not so much politics. I came from a really poor university and there was so much to learn! I just listened to them.”\textsuperscript{229} Both the “American” concept of western civilization and his

\textsuperscript{227} Gay, “The German-Jewish legacy--and I”, 22.
\textsuperscript{229} Interview with the author, 23 January 2009.
identification with the variety of the intellectual emigration from Germany, shaped the interdisciplinary approach to the past that he would continue to develop over the next few decades.

Many American historians of European history such as Krieger, Schorske, Stuart Hughes and Franklin Ford were attracted to Neumann’s emphasis on the role of ideas in history. German intellectuals who had been introduced to the United States, or whose writings became more widely read, were Karl Löwitz, Carl Hempel, Leo Strauss, Karl Mannheim and Georg Simmel. Gay’s early theoretical explorations prompted his relationship with Neumann: “He was a very surprising person in that department.” He recalled how he and his fellow students were attracted to theorists like Weber and Dilthey “whom we started to read only because Neumann mentioned him”. Dilthey was “one of his favorites, but nobody had heard of him”. Gay now started to collect some Dilthey himself, for example his “good long essays on eighteenth century Prussia, or Luther”. His re-appreciation of émigré theory was particularly noticeable in the case of the often vilified Hegel. In *Reason and Revolution. Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941), Neumann’s close friend Herbert Marcuse “rescued Hegel’s reputation among students of political philosophy”. Marcuse argued that Hegel’s awareness of the social and philosophical meaning of his thought connected him to the French Jacobins. Reading *Reason and Revolution* caused “a highly appreciated historian of political thought George Sabine, a distinguished philosopher at Cornell, who found it necessary to redo his chapter on Hegel and issue a second edition that saw the man precisely as Marcuse had seen him”. It was Sabine, not the émigré Marcuse that Gay used in his own courses about European intellectual history: “And so did just about anybody who offered that kind of course.” Americans were probably more credible defenders of parts of German intellectual traditions than a Marxist émigré such as Marcuse. Yet, this might initially have covered up the influence of Marcuse’s book on American academia. Contrary to his own statement, Gay had already read Marcuse at Denver University. In a student paper, written in

231 Interview with the author, 23 January 2009.
235 In 1950 the philosopher Walter Kaufmann’s “epoch-making” book *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ* rescued Nietzsche from similar accusations as Hegel received. In his paper “Nietzsche and Postmodernism” (undated) Gay tried on his turn to save this philosopher from associations with postmodernist relativism. Peter Gay’s Personal Collection.
1943, he defended Hegel against associations with communism: “By the way, Communism is, at best, a bastard daughter of Hegel’s thought.” His eagerness to integrate into American culture probably compelled him to exclude Marcuse from the bibliography of his paper.

The Crisis of Western Culture

In the course of the 1940s, American intellectuals’ preoccupation with German history and culture was especially initiated by a growing awareness of the ideological catastrophe at the center of western culture. Already in December 1942, the American journalist Varian Fry published an article in The New Republic with a detailed description of Nazi crimes. A year later, a whole supplement on the massacre of the European Jews became more publicly known. These hints of twentieth-century European calamity rendered American intellectuals unsure about the qualities of American culture at a time when the country put itself forward as international defender of democracy. Literature in English, written by both American and émigré scholars, deepened the conviction that western culture was above all united by a shared sense of cultural crisis. There was a reawakening of interest in controversial thinkers such as Oswald Spengler, Søren Kierkegaard and Alexis de Tocqueville.

Popular books that fed into a general sense of crisis were James Burnham’s The Managerial Revolution (1941) and The Crisis of Our Age (1942) by the sociologist Pitirim Sorokin. The Nazi rise to power in the Weimar Republic convinced many that democracy had a very dark side.

Émigré critique focused on American mass culture, which had aroused German intellectuals in the 1920s. The impact of the Frankfurt School so soon after the war can be explained in part by its financial position. It was the only academic institute in exile that had acquired funding by the American Jewish Committee. Moreover, the Frankfurt School produced two substantial explanations of National Socialism and anti-Semitism during the war: Theodor Adorno's The Authoritarian Personality (published in 1950) and Neumann’s Behemoth. The Structure and Practice of National

236 Gay, “Que es ‘Lo Nuovo’”.
239 Suri, Henry Kissinger and the American Century, 20.
Socialism (1942). Adorno was one of the collaborators of this interdisciplinary research, which was launched in 1944 and finally published in 1950. The book formed part of the project “Studies in Prejudice”. Adorno tended to criticize American culture, while denying Weimar intellectuals’ responsibility for the rise of National Socialism. He believed that Hitler was an “aberration”.240 Inspired by Freud’s psychoanalysis, Adorno’s The Authoritarian Personality perceived anti-Semitism and the “authoritarian personality” as products of modernity.241 It claimed that mass culture could lead to totalitarianism in its nourishing of apathy, stereotyped thinking and the cult of personality, which put the United States at risk of replicating the European catastrophe.

Unlike Adorno, another prominent émigré, Hannah Arendt, warned for the danger of relativism in parallels between American liberalism and totalitarianism.242 She stressed that National Socialism could not have happened in the United States. Arendt never claimed that German intellectuals like Heidegger should be absolved of responsibility for their own roles in the National Socialist revolution. Yet in The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), she did not hold the European intellectual and cultural traditions responsible for Nazism.243 Like many German refugees, she was convinced that the Nazis were part of the uneducated lower middle class. She spurned any relationship between German “culture” and ideological catastrophe;244 Nazism was not the outcome of an internal, “organic” German development, but the product of essentially alien and corrupting modern mass practices and ideologies.245 Motivated in different ways, both Arendt and Adorno abstained from criticism of Weimar’s intellectual elite.

It should be taken into account that Arendt and Adorno’s defense of German traditions was formulated at a time when the “Luther to Hitler” thesis of German history shaped both public

243 King, Arendt and America, 191. See also: Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt for Love of the World (New York, 1982) 221.
245 Steven E. Aschheim, Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises (New York, 1996) 111-112.
discourse and American and British historical scholarship. The popularity of this thesis had also compelled Marcuse to explain that Hegel was no proto-Nazi. Adorno and Arendt’s views on the issue of Weimar intellectuals’ moral responsibility stood in sharp contrast to many American scholars’ demonization of the German Idealist tradition. Later scholars have even referred to “the commonplace and unreflective Anglo-Saxon view of German ‘character’.” The initial lack of Anglo-Saxon scholarly publications on German history made war propaganda of the 1930s and 1940s very influential in shaping public opinion. American feelings of superiority after the Second World War, soon led intellectuals to play down the “modern” elements of fascism and communism in favor of a simplistic narrative of “barbarian” totalitarianism. The best-known American representative of the Sonderweg thesis was William Montgomery McGovern’s From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy (Boston 1941). Other supporters of the Sonderweg thesis at the time were Henry Morgenthau, Mark van Doren, Allen Nevins, William Shirer, T.H. Tetens and Emil Ludwig. These attacks on the German Idealist tradition encouraged some émigré scholars to defend German culture in a time when the Nazis were still ruling Europe. The Austrian émigré an literature scholar Leo Spitzer, underlined that the excesses of the illiberal tradition should not be a reason to throw away all its research: “But such writings should not be allowed to discredit the legitimate endeavors of a Burckhardt, a Dilthey, a Simmel, a Weber, a Troeltsch.” In this tense atmosphere, which measured the modernity of western culture, more nuanced criticism of Weimar intellectuals was frequently obscured. Much German-American intellectual exchange, especially in the immediate postwar period, excluded views that were more extensively grounded in the flaws and achievements of both cultures.

Gay’s thinking about western culture was deeply influenced by these discussions about the significance of recent German history for postwar western culture–especially in a time when his contacts to Germany and the Germans were barely existent. He deeply mistrusted German historians.

247 See for example Blackbourn and Eley, The Peculiarities of German History, 8.
who had stayed in Germany during the war. He rejected Friedrich Meinecke’s book *The German Catastrophe: The Emergence of Historicism* (1950): it “conveniently placed the blame for the catastrophe on the international emergence of vulgar mass politics. Even the Jews who had lived and suffered in Germany were at least partly to blame. I read this apologia with a feeling of outrage. I could only agree that the older generation of historians in Germany had very little to teach us, certainly not as far as the rise of Hitler was concerned.”

Published in 1952, his dissertation on the German socialist Eduard Bernstein was one of the first books that set out to establish more subtle connections between German and American intellectual and cultural traditions than the clash between a defense and attack of German culture allowed for. He believed that it had an important message to Germans and Americans alike.

**Bernstein Introduced**

Gay’s thesis “Evolutionary Socialism”, which would later become *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein’s Challenge to Marx*, won one of the Clarke F. Ansley Awards of the year 1950-1951, instituted by Columbia University Press. After his defense of his Ph.D. early June 1951, the head of Columbia University Press remarked: “I don’t know anyone who has completed his dissertation as soon as you.” His publisher added that he had never published a book with such an unfamiliar subject. Gay’s dissertation about Bernstein, who came from an acculturated German-Jewish family, answered to many American scholars’ lack of knowledge about (the history of) communism and socialism at the beginning of the Cold War. In a lecture in the early 1950s, Gay noted: “A Cold War is not conducive to balanced thought; still I am convinced that it will not be long before we will get a more just appreciation of the value of Marxist ideas than now seems possible.”

While the conflicts with the ideological enemy became sharper at the beginning of the Cold War, we have seen that his early interest in European socialism and his admiration of Roosevelt inspired a more nuanced perspective on socialism. Marianne Bernstein, the sole surviving member of the Bernstein family,

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251 “Letter to Chamberlain”, 14 June 1951; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1; Unprocessed.
wrote Gay a letter about his “fair and inspiring biography about my grand uncle Eduard. I think your biography is the only one available in the English language”. 253

His supervisor, Neumann, was of immense value to Gay’s dissertation. His colleague and friend Bob Webb would later observe that “the pre-eminent figure of his graduate-school years was the great Neumann, the quintessential central European intellectual, of the kind whose numbers immeasurably enriched American Academic life over fifty years from the 1930s on”. 254 During his initial exile in London in the 1930s, Neumann transformed himself under the guidance of Harold Laski from a specialist in German law to a social scientist. At Columbia, Stern, who shared Gay’s admiration for Neumann, noticed the political scientist’s deep impact on his students: “There was a magnetism of character and intellect that many students could not withstand. They became disciples, critics, admirers and rebels by turn...” 255 His bibliographical knowledge and interest in those just entering their professional careers was widely known. Gay’s official supervisor was Robert Morrison MacIver, a professor of Sociology and Political Theory: “But he was lazy.” After the first three chapters, he said: “Well, I think it is very good, but you need a conclusion.” Gay replied: “What happened to the heart of my dissertation that I haven’t written yet?” Then “I realized that Morrison was not the man to be important.” 256 Neumann was very helpful for Gay, because he was aware of a Swiss dissertation written on Bernstein. He alerted him to archives in Berlin and the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, and provided him with names of social democrats to interview. Although Gay refused to travel to Germany, he was able to meet Dr. Otto Landsberg, a personal friend of Bernstein’s and the head of the SPD archives, who now lived in the Dutch town of Baarn. 257 Gay regarded his supervisor so highly that in 1951 he wrote a letter to the president of the committee on Labor and Public Welfare of the American Senate, Herbert H. Lehman, to notify him of the relevance of his work. 258

253 “Letter of Marianne Bernstein to Gay”, 20 Augustus 1964; Peter Gay Papers; Box 18.
256 Interview with the author, 23 January 2009.
257 “Letter of Rudolph Rothe (SPD) to Gay”, 14 August 1950; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1.
258 “Letter of Herbert H. Lehmann to Gay”, 30 August 1951; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1.
However, Gay never developed the close friendship with Neumann that he had with another prominent scholar who would influence his work, Richard Hofstadter. It did not help that he found his supervisor’s demeanor “cold”. In a later letter to the cultural historian Jacques Barzun, he even down-played Neumann’s influence on his dissertation: “I had an excellent sponsor, Franz Neumann, and he read one chapter, consulted with me three or four times during office hours, and then read the final draft. That was all.” Maybe he didn’t want to be associated with this Marxist. It has generally been hard to trace Neumann’s influence on his students. Stuart Hughes referred to “the Neumann problem”: his enormous authority was mostly exercised through the spoken word, while the corpus of his published work in English remained small.

Moreover, we have seen that there were in fact some noticeable differences between the two scholars from the start. Like Adorno and Arendt, Neumann “underestimated the Nazis and overestimated the Germans”. Neumann did not take National Socialism seriously enough as an ideology. Communism had Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but he denied the National Socialist movement its theoretical foundations: “There was a mélange of ideas, but not a body of reasoned, integrated postulates.” His analysis of the rise of National Socialism in *Behemoth* exclusively focused on a power struggle between various groups in the Third Reich. In Neumann’s view, the rise of National Socialism reminded most of all of the need to uphold rationality and theory. Only at the end of the war, he started to talk about political morality, stating that the German people must share responsibility for Nazism. In the classroom, however, he would carry on teaching that the study of history must begin with economic and class relationships, with an understanding of politics and ideology dependent on one’s awareness of pressure groups that lay behind them. According to Stuart Hughes, Neumann’s legacy was troubled by the profound hesitation and uncertainty that increasingly shaped his thought in the 1950s, more and more wavering between Marxism and liberal democracy.

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259 “Letter of Gay to his parents”, 13 May 1948; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19.
260 “Letter of Gay to Jacques Barzun, 6 October 1961; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2.2.
261 Stuart Hughes, “Franz Neumann between Marxism and Liberal Democracy”, 446.
262 Katz, 466.
264 Stuart Hughes, 460.
265 Idem., 450.
died in a car crash. Gay mentioned that after receiving the news Marcuse noticed: “And Franz was not even driving.”

While Neumann’s search for a way to reconcile liberalism and socialism started too late to become fully developed, it constituted the young émigré’s scholarly work from the outset. In the early 1950s, Gay would absorb much of what Neumann had been contemplating in the last few years of his life. In the end, Gay felt that his supervisor never really warmed to the liberal center: “Neumann did not care for Bernstein, for he struck Neumann, a rigid philosophical left-wing Marxist, as too feeble, too accommodating a thinker.” More than his student, Neumann advocated the autonomy of ideas. In his essay “The Concept of Political Freedom” (first published in 1953), he claimed: “A conformist political theory is no theory.” While Gay was more theoretically inclined than many American historians, his larger appreciation of Bernstein’s practical insights than Neumann’s would increasingly fuel a historical approach that examined ideas in the context in which they originated.

**Morality and Power**

It was Neumann who first taught Gay about the importance of Weber, who examined ideas in their social context. Since the end of the 1940s, both émigré and American intellectuals debated Karl Mannheim’s ethic of responsibility. Influential Weimar intellectuals such as the political scientist Carl J. Friedrich became convinced that democracy depended on “responsible” elites. This “Weber School” was convinced that most Germans were unfit for leadership and possessed no vision and knowledge required for public office. The link between “morality” and “reality”, which first captured the eighteenth-century French *philosophes*, became an urgent theme among neo-Kantians, notably Ernst Cassirer, during the Weimar Republic. When the threat of ideology became central to scholars’ debates after the war, they shared Weimar intellectuals’ dilemma how to relate moral theory to political practice that avoided both ideological thinking and moral relativism.

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266 Interview with the author, 23 January 2009.
Influenced by Weber and Neumann, Gay stated that socialist thought was not to lapse into ideological dreams, but was to be grounded in political strategy: “Powerful political theories are never pure, intellectual constructs.”270 One of his lectures, probably not long after the publication of his thesis, reflected his conviction that socialists now needed “self-analysis to get rid of what Marx has labeled ‘false consciousness’ on three levels: tactical, strategic, ideological”.271 Mass parties needed to be inspiring and flexible to attract large numbers of votes. In Machiavelli’s view, which was shared by Neumann, not merely ideas but power and reason of state are needed by every community in order to survive. In his later work on the Enlightenment, Gay noted that German émigré historians such as Hans Baron and Felix Gilbert saved Machiavelli from accusations he would have side-tracked the significance of morality in politics.272 These historians underlined Machiavelli’s view that taken in itself, power is not an evil force but a necessity.

Accordingly, Bernstein was able to develop Marxism, because he did not approach it as a closed body of received truths, but was adamant that it should change with social reality. Dismissive of rigid ideology, Gay made a distinction between meek conformism and Bernstein's practical insight into the political situation after the First World War: “A far cry from what he liked to call the ‘revolution-mongering’ of the Left wingers in his own party.”273 Gay pointed to the necessary “era of doubt”, which followed on the “dogmatic creativity” of ideology:

“The liberal social democrat and philosopher Siegfried Marck has compared the period of Revisionism to a kind of Enlightenment epoch, that is, an era of doubt which usually follows on the heels of a time of dogmatic creativity. Revisionism, according to this theory, represents the application of the acid of skepticism to a theoretical structure; it is the attempt to corrode dogmatic incusations and to test the apparently eternal truths of orthodoxy in an empirical fashion.”274

274 Idem., 153.
Bernstein’s achievement, therefore, was his ability to respond to the “practical and theoretical problems” that German socialism faced, when the German labor movement grew ever more remote from revolution around 1900. One significant feature of Bernstein’s thinking was that he learned from his experiences, a quality that returned in Gay’s later depiction of Voltaire. Voltaire illustrated how living in liberal England and tolerant Zürich may enlighten one’s outlook. The socialist’s experience of exile was productive. In the “free atmosphere” of England, which was “professionally reformist,” Bernstein first set out to revise Marxism.

Remarkably, Gay’s praise of Bernstein’s flexibility was partly the result of a flawed understanding of German theoretical traditions. While he himself had learned from Marcuse that Hegel’s dialectics actually formed an antidote to ideological thinking, Bernstein had misinterpreted the philosopher’s dialectical thinking; the great danger of dialectics, the socialist thought, lay in the fact that it completely “abandoned the empirical world for idle speculation.” This misunderstanding moved the dialectical method from the center of the Marxist system to the periphery and substituted “evolutionism” as the core of Marxism. Recently, Helmut Walser Smith has claimed that Gay’s discussion of Bernstein’s misinterpretation of Hegel, and Kant, served to loosen the socialist’s affiliation with German intellectual traditions. But although Gay’s efforts partially involved to show the ties between German and American traditions, while maintaining his mistrust of German culture, this explanation might be too simple. In a lecture in 1952, he referred to both England and Germany as countries where intellectuals earned more respect: “In the United States, intellectuals are in state of constant tension with the community at large.” His observation of American, next to German, anti-intellectualism had made him aware of the achievements of German theoretical traditions. The central and fruitful role of Bernstein’s misinterpretations in his thinking rather enhanced Gay’s conviction that the socialist’s merits were not enclosed in his theoretical constructions, but in the interactions between his empiricism and his ideas. The advantage of Bernstein’s “lack of a really thorough philosophical

276 Idem., 56.
277 Idem., 135.
278 Idem., 133.
education,” he claimed, was that it drove him to rely on common sense and to “give free play to his already powerful skeptical and empiricist sympathies” 280. So although Gay granted that Bernstein’s theory made a negligible theoretical contribution to socialist thought, the revisionist contributed to its successful development exactly because of that. Finally, it has already been shown that under the influence of Marcuse Gay became more appreciative of Hegel’s dialectics as the antidote to, rather than the cause of twentieth-century ideology. Therefore, he thought that not only Bernstein but also earlier socialists’ inflexible belief in progress reflected was rooted in a misunderstanding of Hegel.

Bernstein’s abandonment of determinist thinking entailed his appeal to ethical theory: “The loss of the certainty of victory is small compared to the gain that lies in the recognition of the ethical worth of the struggle and the moral character of the hoped-for goal.” 281 In his thinking, ethical theory replaced a linear idea of progress in order to avoid moral relativism. Hence, theory appears here as both the problem and the solution to the formulation of an anti-ideological morality. Bernstein’s use of Kant’s moral theory was sparked by German neo-Kantians such as Paul Natorp, Hermann Cohen and Ernst Cassirer at the beginning of the twentieth century. Other German socialists often rejected Kant’s abstract idealism, but Bernstein saw in his philosophy a greater sense of realism than in scientific materialism. While holding empiricism in high esteem, ethical theory needed to oppose an “infatuation of positivists with facts and methods of natural sciences”. 282 Gay, therefore, claimed that the “work of revisionism resulted in nothing less than the reintroduction of ethics into socialism”. 283

Again, Bernstein’s use of Kant was the result of misinterpretation. While he thought that Hegel was more dogmatic than he actually was, he deemed Kant too practical. Kant actually perceived that ethics, his idea of the categorical imperative, reflected scientific thinking. After his productive misunderstanding of Hegel, this other misreading proved to have fortunate implications as well. It led to the socialist’s awareness of the irrational factor in politics; not merely the institutionalization, but a general “mood” produced social change. In a lecture about socialism, Gay claimed: “Even if they realize that their cause is not as significant as it appeared a hundred, or even fifty years ago, they must

280 Gay, The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism, 134.
281 Idem., 156.
283 Idem., 154.
act as if it were.” Neumann’s “Approaches to the Study of Political power” had instructed Gay that the prevalent tendency to make liberal and democratic identical was wrong. Inspired by his supervisor, he believed that every regime, totalitarian and democratic ones alike, was to a certain degree rooted in the anxiety of the population: although totalitarian systems institutionalize the destructive role of fear in using methods of terror, propaganda and crime, it “must, however, not be overlooked that every political system is based on anxiety”. Therefore, Bernstein’s use of political strategy to win the hearts of the people was not propaganda, but a rationalization of the insight that irrationality is part of the political process. What distinguished Bernstein and the Utopian Socialists was no absolute difference between rationality and ideology or imagination: “The difference is one of degree, not kind.” Political action always involves “the will to believe”. Here, Gay seems to wrap up Bernstein's ethical socialism in the language of the American intellectual tradition: William James’ quintessential The Will to Believe (1896) rationalized man’s irrationality as well.

A Liberal Narrative?

Gay’s research of German socialism attracted students interested in German history, such as the later historian Renate Bridenthal, who herself had emigrated from Nazi Germany to the United States: “I wanted to work with Fritz Stern or Peter Gay. Most went to Fritz, but a lot of people avoided him too. He was away a lot and did not have time for students. It took him too long to get to students’ dissertations and then he wanted you to rwork it.” But Bridenthal did not think of Gay as a refugee scholar: “I didn’t think his refugee status had anything to do with his or my work. In any case, graduate students didn’t talk about it.”

284 “Lecture: Socialism”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 11.
289 Gay cherished many books by William James and John Dewey, which he bought at the end of the 1940s or beginning of the 1950s. These thinkers argued that it can be rational to adopt an idea if there is no evidence to the contrary.
290 Interview with the author, 13 April, 2009.
For sure, in many ways Gay’s narrative of German socialist revisionism highlighted the scholar’s embeddedness in American academia. He made *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism* explicitly part of American intellectuals’ revaluation of western traditions after the Second World War. According to Gay, Bernstein’s adaptation of socialism to the “bright economic prospects” of new and democratic times shaped his contemporary relevance. In a review in *The Nation* in 1952, Gay noted that the failure of American socialism could be explained by Daniel Bell’s *The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States* (1952).\(^{291}\) The sociologist and “New York Intellectual” thought that socialism had failed because it couldn’t adjust to American non-revolutionary conditions. American socialists were “in this world, but not of this world”.

Consequently, they could learn from Bernstein’s practical socialist theory. In his next monograph, *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist* (1959), Gay thought that political moderation was still relevant to counter radicalism: “It is unhistorical to interpret his moderation as conservatism or as bourgeois ideology.”\(^{292}\) Both Bernstein and Voltaire represented his answers to the rise of ideologies.

Gay’s use of the biographical genre underlined his strong emphasis on the relationship between thought and experience in a time when life writing was often associated with mythmaking and the glorification of powerful men. In the 1940s, his biographical approach, which was influenced by Neumann’s admiration for Dilthey, was not widespread in the United States.\(^{293}\) At Columbia, American literature scholars such as Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling endorsed a biographical approach as well.\(^{294}\) After the war, this American context surely reassured Gay that this genre could also serve liberal ends. He did not worship Bernstein, whose flaws he did not hesitate to mention, but his portrait of the socialist recovered a sense of human dignity in a time when the individual was threatened by mass culture, totalitarianism and ideology in “our technological, bureaucratic age when


\(^{294}\) Jacques Barzun’s *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage* (New York, 1941) influenced Stern’s dissertation about “illiberal” nineteenth-century German intellectuals, as well.
limitations on the liberty of the individual have become the specter that haunts us all”. He maintained his preference for the biography throughout his scholarly career.

Some critics, however, perceived Gay’s portrait of Bernstein’s as an American banalization of the revisionist’s thinking. Indeed, he pictured the socialist as an exemplary liberal archetype, whose moderation had suffered in the “cynical twentieth century” that preferred demagogues. He detected in the socialist’s character “one of the most attractive personalities of German Social Democracy:”

“If he is remembered less vividly than, say, Bebel, this is due largely because he lacked spectacular qualities upon which the popular imagination could fasten. Bernstein was the opposite of the demagogue and the charismatic leader. He was a scholar—intelligent, widely read, patient, and above all, honest. His concern with the truth had an almost obsessive quality: it drove him into abandoning theories in which he had found security, giving up friends with whom he had found happiness, turning his back on a party which had filled his life. He was nervous and easily wounded by criticism, but when he felt that truth demanded it, he spoke fearlessly before hostile groups and willingly made enemies.”

Gay’s elaboration on Bernstein’s character already testified to his effort to examine ideas’ usefulness not merely in relation to the historical context, but also to character and psychology. But even though the émigré historian Klaus Epstein did not question its “scholarly excellence”, he criticized the “liberal” perspective of his biography: “American historians are handicapped when dealing with German developments by the deep-rooted American faith that all problems can be solved by intelligence and good will. [...] American historians have underestimated the impersonal forces and conditions which made German socialists act the way they did, and they have engaged in the futile search for villains.” In his review of three scholarly works about German socialism, Epstein complained that American historians often refused to accept the view that the problems confronting German Socialists were in fact insoluble. Of the three books under review, Epstein interestingly

295 Gay, “Anti-intellectualism”.
297 Idem., 296.
deemed Carl Schorske’s *German Social Democracy, 1905-1917. The Development of the Great Schism* (1955) “the best analysis of the internal development of any party in any country which has come to this reviewer’s attention”. *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism* was soon followed by other publications of a new generation of Europeanists dedicated to filling the American gap of knowledge on European socialism. In his postscript to the re-publication of his Bernstein biography in 1961, Gay singles out Schorske’s “brilliant” analysis *German Social Democracy, 1905-1917. The Development of the Great Schism* (1955), but objected to its melancholic tone: “it seems true that obituaries on the movement are premature: even if it should be true that ideology is dead, the need for radical thinking remains as great as ever.” Schorske himself noticed the gloomy tone of his narrative about the failure of European socialism to prevent the rise of National Socialism: “I realize now that I was writing not only analytic history, but a kind of elegy for a once creative movement that history had destroyed.” Instead of examining the rise and fall of socialism, Gay argued that the life of Bernstein spanned the “growth and near-triumph of the German labor movement”. Bernstein's “near-triumph” hinted at the possibility of future resonance.

But Gay’s liberal archetype did not ignore but stood in close connection to twentieth-century catastrophe. The socialist’s “solidity and safe emotionalism” formed the antidote to the “illiberal” archetype in Stern’s research of the predecessors of National Socialism. Although Stern would not complete his dissertation until 1954 (and publish it in 1961), his Master’s thesis already discussed Arthur Moeller van den Bruck. Gay admired Stern’s dissertation, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*: “It was a clever subject to deal with. It was about an era that had not been and should be covered.” Stern encouraged his understanding of cultural continuities between the nineteenth century and National Socialism, which Gay himself embarked on the search for the “liberal” character. Epstein did not appreciate that Gay’s insights into the rise of National Socialism was very much alive to the traps of a “liberal” perspective, because his age, “used to far more effective persecutions, these tribulations

300 Idem., 306.
303 Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
of the German socialists may seem mild enough...But to the nineteenth-century socialists the hardships
were very real, and they should not be underrated by a century far more callous toward mass-
suffering.” He did not so much judge the failure of German democracy, but in fact noted that
German intellectuals confronted insurmountable problems at that time: “If his revisionism failed, it
was, ultimately, not the failure of Bernstein but the failure of Germany. It is a failure that offers
eloquent testimony as to the kind of country Germany really was, and that becomes all the more
striking when we contrast it with the success of the British labour party.” The many crises that
Bernstein faced made German revisionist socialism, according to the historian, an in many ways richer
eexample for postwar-America than the English socialists. His appreciation of Bernstein's revisionist
socialism as a model for American intellectuals can be partly traced back to the turbulent German
political context in which he expressed his ideas: “In our time, in which the uninformed and the biased
like to tax Socialists with lack of devotion to freedom, Bernstein’s writings deserve much greater
attention than they have hitherto received. It will be admitted then, that Bernstein’s general political
position is of great relevance to countries with genuine parliamentary institutions.” German
intellectuals’ struggles reminded countries in which the liberal tradition was more self-evident of the
weaknesses and achievements of democracy. Scholars’ neglect of Bernstein, Gay now claimed,
concealed that in many respects German constitutional Socialism surpassed its British counterpart in
significance. Gay’s dissertation, therefore, underlined that liberal democracy is never self-evident,
but needs to be continuously conquered.

So Gay’s Bernstein biography did not construct a German Sonderweg or naive optimist
visions, but insisted that German socialist traditions, if dealt with in the historical context, could serve
as an inspiration for the present. In this sense, he discussed “American” hope in a transatlantic
context, substantiating it with German theory and history. Although Bernstein was inspired by English

305 Idem., xi.
306 Idem., 300.
307 Gay, The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism, xi.
308 In his reconstruction of German revisionist socialism, Gay drew on the critical social historical works of
many German academics, like Eckhardt Kehr and Hans Rosenberg to state Germany’s aggressive imperialist
politics. He made use of Weimar scholarship, for example Die November Revolution (1928) of the social
democrat Hermann Müller.
socialism, he stressed that his experiences in England merely strengthened opinions to which he had been arriving on his own. Fabianism and German revisionism are, therefore, “brothers, if not twins.”

For the socialist, like for Gay himself, Anglo-American culture offered a moral point of reverence, but no model. Both German and American intellectuals needed one another. Gay, therefore, supported the idea behind Stern’s collection of historiographical accounts by American and European historians, *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (1956):

“When Fritz Stern compiled his anthology, The Varieties of History, he had a good deal of trouble trapping professional historians in theoretical pronouncements. He found a letter here, an inaugural lecture there—in fact, inaugural lectures are favorite escape valves from humdrum research. But in general, as the book testifies, historians are busy working on history, perhaps embodying a philosophy, but rarely articulating it.”

The essays of both European and American historians built a bridge between the two continents that countered ideas of American exceptionalism. In a lecture about anti-intellectualism, Gay compared European and even German culture in this respect favorably to American culture: “We have glimpses: professors, dons, are not openly despised, and in some places not despised at all. I suspect that the real distinction is that in Europe the intellectual has self-respect, in America he has self-hatred. This is, to be sure, partly the result of populist culture here, but also of other factors. The German petty bourgeois (take my parents) certainly had books of classics at home (unread) and didn’t despise professors (openly).”

In the 1950s émigrés such as Gay and Stern would be united in their critique on American populism. But in spite of Gay’s appreciation for *The Varieties of History*, Stern’s project also became a source of tension between the two second-generation émigrés, which would become larger over the years. He and Stern had met in 1947 during Gay’s second year at Columbia. They discussed their orals with each other and encountered one another at the summer house of the Russian historian Henry Roberts in Vermont; especially at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s, they were part of the same

310 Gay, “Course notes: ‘Philosophy of History’”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 4.2; Unprocessed.
American and émigré intellectuals’ networks. Nevertheless, when he was composing his anthology, Stern did not ask Gay to translate one of the essays. According to Gay, he approached translators whose German was much less fluent: “I began to dislike Fritz, although I decided to hide it from him.”

After the publication of The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism, many more articles and books on the issue of Weimar intellectuals’ moral responsibility appeared. As a response to Friedrich Meinecke, Hajo Holborn’s essay “German Idealism in the Light of Social History” (1952) stressed the moral responsibility of all individuals and all peoples for their decisions. Holborn was influenced by Meinecke’s ideas on the responsibility of power. Other historians who critically examined the relationship between the Idealist tradition and German political catastrophe were Stern, Mosse, Georg Iggers and Fritz Ringer, who all emigrated to the United States when they were relatively young. In their introduction to Holborn’s Festschrift, The Responsibility of Power, the editors Stern and the American historian Leonard Krieger noted that the post-totalitarian era should provide “an image of power and responsibility for western postwar liberalism”. Holborn’s examination of the importance of the power of the state and a German culture of inwardness inspired Stern’s thesis of the “unpolitical German”. He resisted a similar relativism in claiming that the “tragic experiences” of the 1930s and 1940s upset historiography through its loosening of the ties between philosophy and history, which left historicism without “definite categories of judgment”. Because German elites had been guilty of

312 Interview with the author, 6 February 2009.
314 See also: Fritz Ringer’s The Decline of the Mandarins. The German Academic Community 1890-1933 (Rosewood City, 1967). Frederic Lilge, The Abuse of Learning: The Failure of the German University (New York, 1947), a short and flawed book, first demonstrated the degree to which the specialization of German professors estranged them from the political reality of the Weimar Republic. They continued to identify ethics with power, while their focus on ideas and politics came at the expense of economics and society. Lilge pointed out that German academics’ resentment of modern industrial society made many of these twentieth century heirs of the German idealist tradition vulnerable to the irrational dimension of the conservative mythos during the Weimar Republic.
316 See Fritz Stern, “The Political Consequences of the Unpolitical German”, The Failure of Illiberalism. Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany (New York, 1992) 3-25. This essay was first delivered as an address of a general session of the Pacific Branch meeting of the American Historical Association in December 1957.
National Socialism, they claimed, it was the task of the postwar elite to prevent a repetition of events debating these “categories of judgment”.

Other émigré historians that discussed German intellectuals’ responsibilities for the rise of National Socialism were represented in Hans Kohn’s collection of essays, *German History: Some New German Views* (1954). This volume discussed the role that particularly historians had played in shaping anti-democratic and anti-western sentiments.318 Kohn’s volume discussed German responsibility in a climate of polarization between denial and accusations of intellectuals’ role that shaped American academia to a much larger degree. In his introduction, he observed a tendency in German historiography to either see National Socialism as a product of the West, or as a legitimate fight to defend Christian values against communism. Combining elements of these two tendencies, Kohn perceived a third “school” aiming to get rid of Western influences and to rebuild Europe in a “German” spirit.319 The historians in Kohn’s volume intended to show that German intellectual traditions were in fact an integral part of the West, although another émigré historian, Klemens von Klemperer, noted that this concept against which German history was measured, still remained vague.320 These efforts were criticized by later generations of historians, who thought that they were too much allied to complacent liberal beliefs.321 But it should be taken into account that these “liberal” views on German history often arose from earnest attempts to search for more complex interactions between German and American intellectual traditions than the clash between a defense and attack of German culture allowed for.

Just after the war, however, German historians were not particularly beguiled by émigré and American endeavors to get to grips with their own past. It were often émigré historians such as Stern, Holborn and Mosse, who were eager to debate these dilemmas in their place. Stern recalled:

“When…Germany turned into a monstrous tyranny, we became the guardians of German history;

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321 This criticism is elaborated on in Chapter IV.
from 1933-1945, German history was being written here and in England, or not at all.”

There were few debates about political ideas in West Germany. Many leftist historians had fled the country in the 1930s, and conservative historians such as Gerhard Ritter guided German historical scholarship. Many of these German historians did not reflect on or dismissed the role of the tradition of historicism in the rise of National Socialism, but tended to avoid the questions about individual responsibility during the Nazi period. Indeed, the great majority of historians during the Weimar Republic, and a large number after 1945, continued to operate within the idealist tradition; they identified ethics with power, to view the history of the German state as a healthy one and to occupy themselves mainly with ideas and politics to the neglect of economics and society, which would only change in the 1960s.

Still, the German publication of *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism* was published in 1954. After Gay had finished his dissertation, he compelled his American publisher to send his dissertation to German journals. In 1953, the German publishing house Frankfurt am Main Verlag ordered a translation, which was published the following year. Nevertheless, the communication between Gay and the publishing company in Germany, was strained. When publication of the book was postponed, his German publisher Karl Anders assured him that this was due to “objektive Schwierigkeiten” and “kein böser Wille:”

“Ein Buch wie das Ihre, das ich ausserordentlich schätze, in Deutschland herauszubringen, ist immer noch ein verlegerisches Wagnis, denn das Interesse an der theoretischen politischen Literatur ist noch nicht einmal in der Sozialdemokratischen Partei vorhanden. Die Zeiten des aktiven politischen Lebens, in denen Fragen wie der Revisionismus Lebensfragen einer Bewegung waren und Tausende an solchen Diskussionen teilnahmen, sind in Deutschland nicht mehr an der Tagesordnung. Es wird also einige Zeit dauern, bis wir die Auflage verkauft haben.”

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324 Exceptions were Eckhart Kehr and Otto Hinze, who gained popularity in the 1960s. Berghahn, “Deutschlandbilder”, 272.
326 “Karl Anders to Gay”, 23 March 1955; Peter Gay Papers; Box 4.2; Unprocessed.
While other German émigré historians such as Mosse and Stern started to publish books about German history a decade later, at the beginning of the 1950s Gay’s approach to the German past was not shared by most of the West German public.  

**American Culture as a Battlefield**

In the course of the 1950s, Bernstein’s “safe emotionalism” seemed more and more out of place. Gay himself noted in the 1961 edition of his biography that Bernstein’s brand of socialism appeared less “probable and relevant” than in the first few years after the war. Democratic socialism was now overshadowed by both nuclear threat and the welfare state: “What social theorist can concentrate on the standard of living, and even the quality of life?” Bernstein’s modesty and decency seemed a little bleak during the cultural clash between the two military super powers. New York Intellectuals such as Nathan Glazer and Irving Kristol felt that western civilization was once again threatened by ideology. Roosevelt’s New Deal, so admired by Gay, was often perceived as the road to communism. Citizens were expected to take sides and neutrality was suspect. Ironically, the United States frequently seemed to resemble the sort of society it proclaimed to fight. The rise of strong anti-communist sentiments questioned convenient contrasts between the “liberal” United States and the new totalitarian enemy. After Truman announced that the Soviets had detonated a nuclear bomb in September 1949, McCarthyism increasingly took hold of American society. The “phobic overreaction” of the senator of Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, involved the delusion that communism was not only a threat to the United States, but also in the United States.

While McCarthy’s hysteria divided American universities, the boundaries between state policy and academia faded. The links between the government and intellectuals grew much more intimate; this was the era of intellectuals in power. The “Cold War University” was founded, which assisted

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327 Mosse’s first book about German history, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1964), was only translated into German 15 years after its publication. Stern’s *The Politics of Cultural Despair* was translated in 1963.


government policies by studying foreign countries and languages. It pursued research that was designed to serve practical and immediate government purposes in protecting a liberal world order. Prominent liberal historians as well as conservatives and anticommunist academics, such as the philosopher and future neo-conservative Sidney Hook, insisted that all recognizably left-wing professors be dismissed. As a graduate student, the German émigré Henry Kissinger voluntarily reported to the FBI on his fellow students, friends and professors.332

Gay, since 1953 Assistant-Professor at the Department of Public Government, observed “two warring groups at New York cocktail parties” of the 1950s: extreme pessimists and patriots. These two groups formed the immediate context of his early scholarly career. He observed that “anti-Americanism was becoming the anti-Semitism of the intellectuals;” they both reflected stereotypical thinking. These pessimists about American culture believed that McCarthy would become president. Other colleagues turned to the opposite extreme: “The patriotic protestations of repentant radicals had all the marks of the self-indulgent orgy of the prodigal son come home.” Gay remembered a few heated evenings at the house of the German-American émigré historian Karl August Wittfogel, who had moved from a commitment to communism in the 1920s to a principled McCarthyism in the 1950s. In the end, Gay broke off their friendship. But although he himself did not waver in his support of Cold War America, the rise of McCarthyism complicated his views on the United States:

“That is why I found it galling to witness the degradation of a symbol when, in the 1950s and after, the Stars and Stripes came to be monopolized by McCarthyites and by chauvinists who sported bumper stickers reading ‘America: Love it or Leave It.’ [...] Clearly America was more complex than I could have imagined in the 1930s, but it did not lose for me, nor has it ever lost, it’s aura of being a man’s last hope.”

But in the polarized postwar atmosphere of the 1950s, Gay’s ideas about the significance of recent German history for postwar western culture were forced to change when American intellectuals

331 Suri, Henry Kissinger, 97.
334 Idem., 39.
further developed their own attitudes towards the German past and its intellectual and cultural traditions.

**Émigré and American Disillusionment**

The rise of McCarthyism intensified American scholars’ use of German theoretical traditions and parallels with twentieth-century German history. The two “warring groups” in New York were both deeply affected by the Frankfurt School’s critique on American culture. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the members of the Frankfurt School published a large number of articles in the main journals of the New York Intellectuals, like *Commentary*, which was founded in 1945. Hook and the young Daniel Bell had a foot in Horkheimer’s circle. A network of social scientists sympathetic to European theoretical traditions took shape, which also included the sociologists David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, Nathan Glazer, Lewis Coser, Talcott Parsons, Benjamin Nelson and Barrington Moore. The mutual disillusion of New York Intellectuals and émigrés with communism led to similar concerns about the nature of bureaucracy, human nature and modernity itself. A general shift to a more conservative stance was unmistakable. Deserting his former ideological beliefs, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a former OSS member, adopted a more moderate perception of human nature and social possibilities: “The degeneration of the Soviet Union taught us a useful lesson. It broke the bubble of the false optimism of the 19th century. Together with the rise of fascism it reminded my generation of the imperfection of man.” After the war these intellectuals discussed a more “mature liberalism” that had absorbed the “lessons” of the twentieth century. In *The Irony of American History* (1952), the protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr criticized postwar Christian culture for being too optimistic, sentimental and self-absorbed and advocated a “tough liberalism”.

In many cases, émigré theory helped to legitimize a diminished belief in the possibility of social change among many New York Intellectuals. Lionel Gossmann noted that the time of émigrés’

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336 Wheatland, 179. The shared experiences and interactions between ex-Marxist émigrés and American intellectuals have barely been researched. Thomas Wheatland’s account is well-researched, but does not provide a thorough analysis of these intellectuals’ complicated attitudes towards German intellectual traditions.
arrival in the United States was “propitious for what they had to offer their host country: namely, a kind of theoretical reflections motivated and informed not by optimism and confidence in continuous and unlimited improvement, but by a sense of social, political, and cultural crisis.” 338 Both Bell and Irving Howe agreed that criticizing mass culture served “conveniently to replace attacks on bourgeois society”. 339 The theory of totalitarianism was a widespread idea among American intellectuals before it entered the war, but the Frankfurt School provided the language for a more sophisticated understanding of its form, function and social significance. 340 Friedrich Pollock and other members of the Frankfurt School developed a theory of East-West convergence in which “the totalitarian societies of fascist Germany, Communist Russia, and the New Deal America emerged as the capitalist successors to the free-market era of the liberal bourgeoisie”. 341 In addition, Arendt’s popular theory of totalitarianism, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, suggested a continuity between communism and National Socialism that increased American fear of “red fascism”. 342 Many liberal thinkers in the 1950s detected a “soft” totalitarianism in the United States parallel to the “hard totalitarianism” attributed to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. 343 Arendt’s work played a crucial role in creating and defining an ongoing (and increasingly contested) post-Second World War “discourse of evil” in which Nazism and Auschwitz became “symbolic code words”. 344

Both émigré and American scholars agreed that Marxism was no longer relevant to postwar thinkers because it had not been able to explain, let alone prevent, the rise of National Socialism and the Holocaust. At the same time, they possessed an inside knowledge of Marxism and ideology when the Cold War made such knowledge relevant. 345 American prosperity implied that a focus on

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340 Wheatland, 171.
341 Idem., 161.
342 Stuart Hughes claimed that the term seemed to ease the shock of emotional readjustment for Americans and émigrés who had just defeated one enemy and were now called upon to by their governments to confront another enemy in the late 1940s and 1950s. Hans Kohn wrote an article against this equalization of these two ideologies “Fascism and Communism-A Comparative study”, but scholarly and public opinion increasingly moved in the opposite direction. *The Sea Change*, 120.
344 Asscheim, “Nazism, Culture and the origins of Totalitarianism”, 133.
345 Kimmage, *The Conservative Turn*, 5; See also: Wheatland, 101.
economic or political factors did not suffice to elucidate the radicalization of American culture during McCarthyism.346 Building on earlier concerns with the condition of western culture during the war, a cultural emphasis now dominated American intellectual discourse.347 Because of these reasons, “the culture concept was becoming the foundation stone of the social sciences—even among historians”.348 Not only Adorno, but also other émigré scholars like Karl Mannheim in his cultural history and Freud in his psychoanalysis affected the postwar search for the American “character”. Erik Erikson’s Childhood and Society (1950), which contains a chapter entitled “Reflections on the American Identity”, is a milestone in American character studies. This study, the most popular publication by a pupil of Freud’s, on the hysteria in personality and culture, was the first major work that equated American identity and character.349

Largely formulated in the 1940s, the influence of Adorno’s thought on American intellectuals grew substantially in the debate about American populism and mass culture of the 1950s, when research on the cultural origins of McCarthyism by scholars such as Dwight MacDonald flourished.350 Intellectuals like the sociologist Edward Shils collaborated with the members of the Frankfurt School on topics such as mass culture criticism and authoritarianism.351 The Frankfurt School’s use of Freud’s psychoanalysis played a central role in American intellectuals’ postwar justification of these shifting attitudes. Carl Schorske noted that there was a shift from “Promethean to Epimethean culture heroes, seen most strikingly in the turn many intellectuals took from Karl Marx to Sigmund Freud, when the possibilities of genuine changes in society and politics seemed remote”.352 Psychoanalysis encouraged parallels between German and American culture. Europeanists and Americanists discussed the irrational drives and longings that underlay people’s attraction to respectively Nazism or Communism.

346 Wheatland, 133–4.
349 Idem., 509.
351 Wheatland, 101.
or “populists, progressives, and abolitionists”. American scholars formed a “Columbia School” that included intellectuals such as Hofstadter, Bell, Niebuhr, Trilling, Irving Kristol and Walter Metzger, who were all part of the same social circle as Gay.

Especially among Columbia scholars, Adorno’s concept of European anti-Semitism profoundly shaped the understanding of “American fascism” or McCarthyism. Adorno’s examination of the link between personality structure and political behavior among these historians and social scientists was very much in the intellectual air. In The Lonely Crowd (1950), Riesman and Nathan Glazer obviously referred to Adorno in their suggestion that a link existed between the American Far Right and an alleged “Teutonic Authoritarian Personality”. The publication of the collection of essays The New American Right (1955), edited by Bell, illustrated the concentration of “scholarly prejudice against the masses” at Columbia. Seven of the contributors, among whom Hofstadter, Peter Viereck and Talcott Parsons, were affiliated with the university. These scholars perceived parallels between both McCarthyism and National Socialism in attitudes towards intellectuals, liberals and “perhaps, even American Jews”. Students of Hofstadter pointed to the downside of the rise of American intellectuals’ comparative perspective. They claimed that the memory of Nazism troubled the debate of Gentile-Jewish tensions in America, anticipating conclusions that populism and German fascism had much in common. The historian of the American South and supporter of the civil rights movement, C. Vann Woodward, who would become close to Gay in the 1970s, now commented that populism had become the “new evil” in the United States. Stern agreed with the Americanist Merle Curti, Hofstadter’s Doktorvater, that American intellectuals’ fear of the masses had grown excessively: “In the past two decades attacks on our

353 Brown, Richard Hofstadter, 129.
355 Brown, Beyond the Frontier, 82.
356 King, 90. See also Brown, Richard Hofstadter, 82.
357 Idem., 106. According to his biographer Brown, Hofstadter may have been eliminated from consideration for positions at Johns Hopkins University and the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1940s, because he was considered too Jewish. Richard Hofstadter, 134.
materialism, on the decline of our moral stamina, on all the putative ills of our mass society have been heard from every side.”

Still, the rising status of *The Authoritarian Personality* in American academia remains quite remarkable, since Adorno did not differentiate between German and American anti-Semitism and he had done no fieldwork in the United States. Gay was especially critical of Adorno and Arendt. About the latter he noted: “We didn’t belong to the same crowd at all. I didn’t like what she had written, she was not a good historian. She was generalizing like crazy. In the *Origins of Totalitarianism* she generalizes about the bourgeoisie in ways that I found not very helpful. I came from a German-Jewish background that was proud to be middle class.” He later remembered how shocked he was that American intellectuals were so pessimistic about American culture:

“They had had all the advantages of American life from the beginning […] I thought they were deliberately turning their backs on the American experience, an experience that I was absorbing through every pore. Their inability to read the evidence, to trust American institutions, and to distinguish between American bouts of repressiveness and systematic European totalitarianism struck me as a cultural masochism from which my rooted feeling for America protected me.”

In a lecture of the 1950s, Gay criticized “ex-communists who spend the rest of their days feeling guilty” about their early seduction by the Soviet Union. Later he reiterated this modern-day disillusionment: “The modern ex-socialist or ex-political intellectual is a tired refugee: so guilty about his youthful involvement and so proud of his belated discovery of ‘reality’ that he has little time to look around him.”

Many “tired” refugees and ex-ideologues now found each other in the topical

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360 King notes: “Obviously, he should have acknowledged more clearly that American political culture offered what German political culture did not: a democratic-liberal tradition that helped counteract the very real anti-Semitism and white racism in America.” *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals*, 88; For Martin Jay’s criticism on *The Authoritarian Personality*, see *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley, 1973) 247-8.
361 Interview with the author, 13 April 2009.
363 Gay, “Socialism”.
Weimar debate about morality and power at the beginning of the Cold War. An urgent call for “realistic” politics began to forge international relations that affirmed the role of power.\textsuperscript{365} While Neumann had taught Gay to appreciate Machiavelli, the Italian thinker was now frequently used to legitimize the absence of idealism and the use of propaganda and strategy as “realism”. Gay spurned the pessimist sense of reality as the result of a “misreading of Reinhold Niebuhr”.\textsuperscript{366} In his work \textit{The Irony of American History} (1952) Niebuhr’s “realist” stance towards man’s capacity for evil did not involve lapsing into cynicism about the possibilities for social change. According to Gay, the new realism was “anything but realistic”: “What have we really discovered? That life is more complicated than Marx said it was, that politics cannot do everything, and that capitalist society can serve welfare better than was generally supposed before the great depression.”\textsuperscript{367} He added that Bernstein had already found out a confident moderation of communism a few decades before.

Gay particularly came to dislike the “aristocratic cultural conservatism and schematic Hegelian Marxism” of the Frankfurt School.\textsuperscript{368} Of the members of the Frankfurt School, only Gay’s supervisor and Herbert Marcuse decided to stay in the United States. Founded in 1923, the Frankfurt School became allied to Columbia University from 1934 to the late 1940s, although most members, notably Adorno and Max Horkheimer, had moved from New York to California before then. It was the only German school of thought that – because they were independent financially – managed to emigrate as a cohort. Gay rejected Adorno and Horkheimer’s attitude towards the country that had taken them in:

“As well-known left-wing cultural critics, they typically were among the very few among the refugees from Nazi Germany to the United States who, after the war was over, left this country in almost indecent haste. They had spent their alienated American years without ever candidly acquainting their hosts with the fact that their radical research was in any way indebted to Marxism. Intent on leaving the most innocuous impression on their

\textsuperscript{365} See for example Richard F. Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism”, \textit{International Organization}, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring, 1994) 249-277, 249.
\textsuperscript{366} Gay, “Postscript”, 309-10.
\textsuperscript{367} Idem., 307.
host country, they insisted that they were working on what they liked to call a “critical theory”. Adorno and
Horkheimer, to revive an old approach, did not live in this country, they just took up room in it.”369

Only after the fall of France in 1940, and America’s entry into the war a year and a half later, the
members of the Frankfurt School reluctantly decided to publish in English. After the war they would
soon return to West-Germany. According to Gay, these émigrés’ impact on American culture was “not
without problems”.370 The later historian’s emphasis on the connections between a critical attitude and
public responsibility demanded that intellectuals’ made themselves “at home” in the country in which
they lived.

Adorno’s study on mass communication, authoritarianism, anti-Semitism, and Freudian
analysis defined a postwar generation of American historians.371 Gay did not appreciate the large
influence of Adorno on his friend Hofstadter’s work. He had some reservations about Hofstadter’s
pessimism about American populism in The Age of Reform: “To what extent is your study an apriori
study? That is to say, to what extent do you start with an aristocratic picture of what society should
look like, and then come out with your indictment of populism?” Instead of a one-sided focus on
American culture, Gay asked the Americanist whether “he had really looked into English, German
anti-intellectualism? The European experience would suggest that no society is perfect, that one must
take one’s chances with one form of perfection or another. As your piece now stands, its aristocratic
assumptions show.”372 This criticism was also echoed in Gay’s estimation of Hofstadter’s first book,
The American Political Tradition: “In his first book I felt that he was overdoing it, some of the people
were not so wicked.”373 He felt that the Americanist’s aim to criticize historians’ idealization of
American “democratic” politics went too far.

Nevertheless, Gay deeply admired his friend Hofstadter: “He never struck me as a reformed
radical […]. Hofstadter was a liberal of a very skeptical kind. He did not like pieties for their own

370 Idem., 119.
371 Brown, Richard Hofstadter, 90.
372 “Letter to Hofstadter”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 3; Unprocessed.
373 Interview with the author, 13 April 2009.
sake. He had trouble with automatic liberalism along with anything else.”374 His friendship and discussions about work with Hofstadter formed an example of the intense interactions between American and émigré intellectuals in the early 1950s: “Our interests intersected even more when in the early fifties, Hofstadter organized a major study of the radical right in America. Dick and I regularly exchanged draft manuscripts for each other’s criticism…and I profited hugely from reading drafts of the books he wrote.”375 Contrary to many other intellectuals, Gay thought that Hofstadter did not lapse into despair about the future of liberalism, but was inclined to question it. Hofstadter’s famous essay “The Pseudo-conservative revolt” (1954), which was published in The New American Right, echoed much of his own criticism of American intellectuals’ pessimism. He considered The Age of Reform Hofstadter’s “most daring book. He was arguing about certain sacred grounds of the progressives and came out with surprising results.”376 A central argument of the book is that the alleged links between the movement’s populism and the New Deal were false, which reassured Gay’s own admiration for Roosevelt’s more “pragmatist” politics. Gay would continue to consider The Age of Reform one of his favorite history books.

**Constructing American Exceptionalism**

In the 1950s Gay’s explorations of narratives for the transatlantic West confronted not only pervasive pessimism, but also excessive optimism about American national qualities. Criticism of American mass culture and liberal values was increasingly countered by a call for more American confidence. Since the 1940s, there was a “boom in national character studies”.377 Many New York intellectuals such as Boorstin and Bell called for a more exclusive emphasis on “American” qualities. While they had first attacked American provincialism and its resistance to European culture and politics in the 1930s, and looked to communism and socialism as alternatives, they now presented the United States to be the center of western civilization. Naturally, this tendency went against Gay’s own project to

374 Gay, quoted in Brown, 11.
375 Gay, “A Life of Learning”, 211.
376 Interview with the author, 13 April 2009.
further an exchange between German-American historical narratives and intellectual traditions that considered both flaws and achievements of both countries.

The new popularity of theories of American exceptionalism often positioned itself opposite to the ideologies of the totalitarian enemy. Columbia scholar Jacques Barzun explained it clearly: “Totalitarianism is ideology, democratism of American brand is anti-ideology.”378 The comparison with a totalitarian enemy yielded a new self-assurance that American culture indeed had an objective quality. In the twentieth century, American exceptionalism was grounded in scholars’ conviction that the United States distinguished itself by the absence of violent revolutions.379 Many publications of these years referred to the stability and continuity of American history, like The Liberal Tradition in America (1955) by the political theorist Louis Hartz. Daniel Boorstin exclaimed in The Genius of American Politics (1953) that the nation’s greatness lay in its ignorance of political theory. Boorstin stated that a practical people needed no myths or faiths to achieve greatness. In his volume The End of ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties (1960), Daniel Bell declared that ideology was no longer a factor in American society. Later, Peter Bergmann summarized that “what distinguished the United States—an inner vagueness, a lack of clarity, and an absence of political theory—could not be exported”.380 American “inner vagueness” was hard to communicate to transatlantic allies.

Both the field of literary criticism and the social sciences set out to revitalize the American character. In The Liberal Imagination (1950), Trilling declared that liberalism was the sole political tradition of America. Trilling’s aim was to encourage an American high culture that could offer moral guidance and combined conservatism and liberalism. His optimism was reflected by his conviction that the advance of liberal anti-communism could refresh the West after the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the American Studies movement undertook an interdisciplinary quest that examined the relationship between art and society: the researching of symbols and images served to uncover the diversity of the “national mind”. Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land: The American West

378 Jacques Barzun, quoted in Novick, That Noble Dream, 300.
related the history of ideas to art, literature, popular culture, politics, technology and material culture.

Although Gay shared this resistance against a pessimism about American culture, he disagreed with the theories of American exceptionalism, which often involved a one-sided criticism of German intellectual traditions since the 1930s. These attacks built on the earlier rigidity of the American thesis of the Sonderweg. While many American intellectuals had been influenced by émigré thought, they now turned against its obvious impact. In spite of his early interest in émigré thought, Bell later downplayed the impact of Neumann and Lowenthal on his thinking. 381 Bell added that “the inadequacies of many social theories about America […] is due in large measure to the uncritical application of ambient ideas from European sociology to the vastly different experiences of American life. This is most evident in the theory of mass society, a concept that has become the leitmotif of the radical and aristocratic disparagement of American life, and of the effort to view American politics in elite terms.” 382 Shils, who had been cooperating with the Frankfurt School himself, observed that such a belief in the “hard sciences” was the negative result of German romanticism. Shils accused the New York Intellectuals of having been indoctrinated by the romantic social theory of the Frankfurt School; intellectuals like Gay’s close friend Irving Howe were “venting their political frustrations in the cultural arena by employing a romanticism dressed up in the language of sociology, psychoanalysis and existentialism”.

Attacks on Hegel built on repudiations of the German Idealist tradition since the 1930s. Sidney Hook, who had initially been attracted to the Frankfurt School, now argued against the impact of Hegel on American culture and the social sciences in particular. He noted that American intellectuals suffered from a failure of nerve: they had lost confidence in science and grown fascinated with asceticism, mysticism, pessimism and despair; their panic led them to abandon responsibility in favor of “false superstitions”. 383 A prominent New York Intellectual such as Boorstin suggested that the American Studies programs tried “to prove to the rest of the world that America has a culture too–

381 Wheatland, 216.
383 Wheatland, 21.
in pseudo-Hegelian terms”. He calls it significant that “the major theorists of mass society – Karl Mannheim, Emil Lederer, Hannah Arendt– have been European, and derived their concept from European experience”. Boorstin suggested here that these émigrés’ theories were irrelevant to the American situation, because every country had an “inner unity of civilization”. Philosophs such as Karl Popper, the ex-communist James Burnham and the German émigré philosopher Leo Strauss associated Hegel’s historicism with anti-rationalist and totalitarian forces. Burnham’s book *The Machiavellians. Defenders of Freedom* (1943) perceived Hegel and Nietzsche as predecessors of National Socialism. In addition, Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) links Hegel, through Marx, to the extreme Left and, through German nationalism, to the Third Reich. The progressive historian of American history, Merle Curti, treated Hegelianism as a false ideology in his work *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (1932, revised in 1959). Social historians like Curti considered Hegelian synthesis as the “opium for the materially deprived”.

**A Loss of Faith in History**

So while intellectuals’ pessimism about American and western culture was often infused by émigré thought, their fresh optimism resulted in a rejection or downplay of a use of German intellectual and cultural traditions. This radicalism made Gay’s search for more constructive transatlantic exchange relevant but complicated. Another factor that undermined the construction of narratives about German history for the postwar debate about the West in the 1950s was a general loss of belief that historical scholarship could provide meaningful explanations. Consequently, American intellectuals often approached the flow of émigré thought in American academia since the 1930s without much knowledge of the historical context in which it originated. American indifference to the historical context of émigré thought is surprising in view of the articles during the mid- and late 1930s and early 1940s in American journals that had detailed German historians’ collaboration, or their concessions, during the Nazi regime. Certainly, since the 1930s an interest in German history had grown

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385 Hamerow, “Guilt, redemption, and Writing German History”, 59.
386 Merle Curti, quoted in Hamerow, 59.
387 Oscar J. Hammen, “German Historians and the Advent of the National Socialist State”, *The Journal of*
compared to the Interbellum. American history departments, which had mainly focused on English and French history before the war, now started to focus on German history as well. John Higham has noted that “Germany and Russia have thus become test cases for the renovation of the progressive conception of history, and the historian’s success in merging Western and exotic categories of historical explanation for these fields becomes a prerequisite to any general interpretation of history.”

But it took until the 1960s before the first synthesis of fascism, William Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, appeared in American historical scholarship. Although the years 1945-1960 saw the unearthing of a mass of documentation, the flood of this material discouraged scholars from attempting a new synthesis of fascism. In the meantime, perceptions of German history continued to infuse American intellectuals’ views on western culture. Adorno’s return to Europe, in October 1949, just before the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, symbolized this disconnection between émigrés’ biographies and work in postwar America.

The lack of knowledge of the German historical context was especially noticeable in the American reception of Ranke. Stern regretted that Ranke’s reputation “suffered especially at the hands of Anglo-American historians’ pretentious positivism,” which assumed that historicism implied a moral relativism. A belief in progress prevented many of them to participate in philosophical debates about the nature of history, because “history would take care of itself”. Unlike historians in England, France and Germany, Americans made no real effort to discuss the nature of historical knowledge. Many of them considered Ranke’s critical analysis of documents as a confirmation of the objectivist norm they already held on to. Until the arrival of German émigré historians in the 1930s, there were hardly any scholarly articles about the German Idealist tradition in which Ranke worked. The German “crisis of historicism,” intensely debated by Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Troeltsch in Weimar Germany, remained largely unknown in American scholarship. Although Karl Lamprecht had

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been an influential visitor during the first stage of the development of American historical scholarship, his attacks on Ranke’s attachment to the Idealist tradition did not gain currency in the United States. In the 1920s and 1930s, other theoreticians such as Weber, Mannheim, Dilthey, Simmel and Cassirer were known, but not broadly debated. Apart from Ranke, German intellectuals such as Max Weber were initially heralded as the pioneers of positivistic and “liberalistic” sociology.  

Awareness of the German crisis of historicism was growing through Charles Beard’s son-in-law Alfred Vagts, a well-known historian. Vagts convinced his father-in-law to read Karl Heussi’s Die Krisis des Historismus (1932), which led to the American historian’s questioning the objectivity of historical writing in the 1930s. Under the influence of Croce, Heussi and Mannheim, he defined a relativist position in the essay “That Noble Dream” (1935). Soon, a reaction to Beard and Becker’s relativism set in, which was fuelled by the conviction that such relativism gave rise to National Socialism. This suspicion grew when Beard promoted an isolationist stance in the Second World War. Countering relativism, but unable to return to a “naive” belief in the objectivity of historical writing, many American scholars turned to the social sciences in the 1950s. In American intellectuals’ battles against totalitarianism, the social sciences often came to be preferred to a soft science like history: “Social theory replaced the historical perspective that in the nineteenth century had permeated the self-understanding of almost every field of learning.” While theories of exceptionalism were much older, the claim was in the Second World War that the social sciences could come up with a concept of national character that was somehow more objective than racialist theory. David Hollinger notes that “science” became a weapon against totalitarianism in these Kulturkämpfe. This belief in science against prejudice and injustice became the cornerstone of the “cosmopolitan identity” of many New York Intellectuals.

394 Novick, That Noble Dream, 290.
395 Already in the 1920s the American historian James Harvey Robinson called for a “new history”, infused with the social sciences, in which advances in anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology would be incorporated into historical writing. Barkin, 166-7.
German and Austrian émigré social scientists dominated the institutes of social science that were founded during the war, like the New School for Social Research in New York. Émigré social scientists were initially much more influential than émigré historians on the development of views on German history in the United States. Schorske confirmed that many American intellectuals and historians were more interested in the analytical tools that these émigré social scientists offered than the historical context of their thought:

“Of course America made its cultural borrowings with little sense of the problems and experiences of that ‘other age’ in which the ideas and art that attracted it were shaped […] Historical analysis could at least reveal the characteristics with which history had endowed that culture at its conception and birth. Illuminating the genesis, meaning and limitations of ideas in their own time, we might better understand the implications and significance of our affinities for them in our time.”

Only at the end of the 1940s, some American historians started to seriously revise their views of Ranke and the Idealist tradition. Publications by Holborn, Cassirer, Friedrich Engel-Janosi, Theodore von Laue, Cushing Strout and Stuart Hughes contributed to these re-examinations. But even then, Georg Iggers claims, the term “historicism” acquired many meanings. The term had not yet been included in any of the standard American dictionaries of the 1950s. In 1959, Stern still criticized the lack of interest of especially American historians in the theoretical explorations of historicist historians like Wilhelm Dilthey or Benedetto Croce. In the 1950s, therefore, Gay’s growing interest in historical explanations to avoid abstract ideology was inspired by the frequently flawed reception of German historicism and intellectuals’ shift to the social sciences.

399 Berghahn and Maior state: the great theoretical studies came from other disciplinary vantage points: from Franz Neumann, Robert Brady, Rudolf Heberle, later Hannah Arendt and Barrington Moore, or from scholars from the inflicted countries.” “Modern Europe in American Historical Writing”, Molho and Wood, Imagined Histories. American Historians interpret the Past, 393-414, 403.


**Searching for a Center in the Cold War**

All these tendencies, intellectuals’ excessive pessimism or optimism and a devaluation of historical scholarship in favor of the social sciences, formed the context of Gay’s defense of the political center at the beginning of the Cold War. In a 1952 lecture, he criticized the “blindness” of people who continued to cherish “romantic notions” of the Soviet Union and the “hysteria” of “anti-Stalinism legitimate in itself, driven to paranoid proportions”. But his construction of a center position was hard in times of deep polarization. His own situation echoed in his description of Bernstein’s last years: “In these last years, then, Bernstein acted as a sort of Cassandra, warning against the dangers of a reactionary subversion of the Weimar Republic, warning against the Bolsheviks.”

Gay supported American intellectuals’ turn against the widespread pessimism about American and western culture. He liked the statement by the sociologist David Reisman that academics were in fact cowards. Why were so few of them were speaking up against McCarthyism? “I liked that very much, that question. He was right, but letter writing was the bravest I could be.” In a letter to *The New York Times* in 1953, he dismissed the widespread fear as a result of a plan to investigate universities in search for communists. He observed a “shocking lack of faith in the faculties:” “Why should the propaganda of a few irresponsible professors be more powerful than the teachings of the vast majority?” Referring to the “endemic timidity of academicians,” he reminded his readers of the fact that the university formed an autonomous academic community that should take a stronger stance against McCarthyism.

Gay’s reaction against intellectuals’ fearful attitudes was also grounded in his interpretation of the “lessons” of the fate of the Weimar Republic, which taught him to have faith in democracy and its institutions rather than to despair. Weimar liberals’ moderation had not prepared them to fight for democracy: “The social democrats failed in 1933 precisely because of their liberalism and moderation,

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403 Gay, “Anti-Intellectualism”.
405 Interview with the author, 13 April 2009.
their devotion to representative government at all costs.” In his letter to *The New York Times*, he argued against the view that “educators” should welcome investigations into alleged subversion, even though they were felt to be unjustified: “It shows a lack of faith in the institution of university, students and in democracy itself: is democracy not healthy enough to survive even foolish or vicious dissent? –a free society can suffer its fools and nuisances.” Universities should trust their students better, instead of portraying them as victims of state propaganda: “Are they too unintelligent to see through and reject those ideas that are inimical to the best of our traditions?” Academics “craved plain, old-fashioned guts”.

But although Gay shared a mistrust against some European traditions, he would increasingly turn against many intellectuals’ repudiation of the transatlantic relationship. Initially, his stance against fear and pessimism allied him to some New York Intellectuals. In a letter to Hofstadter, however, he noted that his wife Ruth objected to “the milieu of Dan Bell at Columbia”. She was probably rejecting ex-Marxists’ strong support of theories of American exceptionalism. Gay’s reference to his wife’s statement also suggests his own more generous opinion of these intellectuals. One of Gay’s first articles on the Enlightenment, “Light on the Enlightenment”, initially a paper for the conference “The Present-day Relevance of Eighteenth-century Thought” (1956), was published in a little book together with submissions from authors like the historian of French history Leo Gershoy and Daniel Boorstin. Besides, his attraction to Bernstein’s thinking was shared by Sidney Hook, who had called the German his favorite socialist theorist in the 1930s.

But although Gay shared their mistrust of some European traditions, he would increasingly turn against many intellectuals’ criticism of the transatlantic relationship. His close friendship to Hofstadter facilitated his inside knowledge of what later became known, a little derogative, as the “consensus school of historical writing” that claimed that American history stood out for the

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408 “Letter to Hofstadter”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2.2; Unprocessed.
411 Brown, 205. According to Brown, the association of Hofstadter with the celebrated “New York Intellectuals” is in general more confusing than illuminating. xviii.
absence of a conservative tradition. Hofstadter observed that the lack of fundamental differences between liberal and conservative “impulses” in American history had obscured its underlying unity. Gay, however, disagreed with Hofstadter's larger emphasis on the unity of American history. Contrary to many other intellectuals, he did not consider a state without political struggle as being really desirable, since it resembled a totalitarian state. According to him, intellectuals’ search for a new national self-esteem ignored a widespread anxiety among the people and ignored social and political conflict. Not only mass communication, but also the dependence and insecurity of “our white-collar groups” led to an undercurrent of fear in American culture. In a 1952 lecture, he remarked that groups such as Irish and Polish patriotic immigrant groups strived to gain status by being more patriotic than earlier arrivals. Other people who dreaded a loss of status were supporters of the American Legion. Gay agreed with Gay’s criticism, because Bell’s exceptionalism did not refer to the “ideology of discontent” he himself detected. Stern believed that modern critics have failed to recognize the western dimension of the “Ideology of Resentment” and that its initial appearance is sometimes entirely neglected, as is exemplified by Bell’s The End of Ideology and Eugene Golob’s The Isms. In the introduction of his analysis of the roots of German ideology, The Politics of Cultural Despair, the historian contended that the cultural pessimism he observed in German history could be discerned in McCarthyism and The National Review as well. In the western world as a whole, he saw a discontentment that “springs not from economic want or the threat of war, but from a dissatisfaction with life in an urban and industrialized culture.” Gay, therefore, attempted to bolster a western character without ignoring, and even welcoming historical conflict. His use of the term “radicalism”, which runs through much of his oeuvre, refers to his ongoing endeavor to define his hopes for society without losing sight of political reality. He noted that there were still no equal opportunities, no adequate project housing and too high costs for

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412 For example, in his volume The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (New York, 1948), Hofstadter criticized the excessive American need for confidence in the future.
415 Stern, xxi.
416 Idem., xxii.
Radicalism, he believed, was necessary to imagine a future as critical reflection of the present. Gay’s radicalism, however, continued to include Bernstein’s moderation. This is illustrated by his criticism of Paul Tillich. In spite of his admiration for his book *The Courage to Be* (1952), Gay condemned Tillich’s tendency to dismiss a conformism that he, like Adorno, observed in American mass culture, which had its roots in Europe and obtained its “most present actualization in present-day America”. Contrary to Tillich, Gay observed its positive quality: “Conformism has much positive value, because it eliminates anxiety.” This statement reflects his conviction in his Bernstein biography that reform should be grounded in political reality.

Nevertheless, Gay realized that this middle-position between radicalism and moderation, theory and reality, demanded expanding the still largely theoretical approach in his Bernstein biography: “Although ‘radicalism’ may often have failed to take into account the irrational factors in man which conservative anthropology stresses, the very omissions have permitted radicalism to set up critical postulates without which little social progress would have been possible.” The welfare state suggested that it may be possible to “have the benefits of socialism without socialism”. This balance between radical and moderate attitudes was increasingly inspired by his interpretation of Weimar’s fundamentally ambivalent lessons: not only irrationality and anti-intellectualism, but also German intellectuals’ isolation from society endangered liberal democracy. The example of Weimar sparked Gay’s understanding that men cannot be persuaded when they are bored. Weimar intellectuals’ fateful lack of enthusiasm for the republic fed his awareness that it is not enough to be “right”, you have to persuade others to agree.

Gay believed that postwar American intellectuals should look at the European past for models of this intellectual “propaganda”. While he was reading Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform*, a history of American popular discontent, he wrote to the Americanist that it made him realize the difference with

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419 Gay, “Notes at his copy of Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be*, p. 97”.
421 Gay, “Notes to the course Intellectual History”. 

European socialism: “What makes American ‘radical’ movements so odd? Compare them with, say, European Social Democracy. That was a relatively rational and extremely sophisticated movement. Is it not characteristic that it should draw to itself scholars and great thinkers–Marx, Jaurès, etc.? Compare them to the superstitious dwarfs that you write about here.” With “rational”, Gay referred to European socialists’ “explanation of economic development, the relative absence of conspiracy myths, etc.”. Mosse affirmed Gay’s observations: “Our propaganda is not geared to European intellectuals and therefore lacks obtaining the desired effect.” This insight is already mirrored by Gay’s Bernstein biography. The socialist’s thinking “goes beyond ascertained fact, making an imaginative leap into the future, but it is careful to curb its imagination”. He came to realize, however, that the all too decent Bernstein’s would not win the hearts and souls of the masses in the accelerating Cultural Cold War. The socialist relied too much on his expectation that the middle classes would join the proletariat “in voting Socialism into power”. In his next book, therefore, Gay chose a hero that was more flamboyant, convincing his public of the blend of propaganda and complexity, radicalism and moderation, at the beginning of the Cold War: the eighteenth-century philosophe Voltaire.

422 “Letter to Hofstadter”, 21 March 1955; Richard Hofstadter Papers, 1944-1970; MS#0603; Box 8, Folder 9; Rare Books and Manuscripts Room, Columbia University. Gay considered European socialism not only far more rational but also, especially in western Europe, a more urban phenomenon; “Germany’s socialists had only some hearty afterthoughts about agrarian problems, and Marx—a real pavement boy—thought it to the great credit of capitalism that it had freed millions from the idiocy of rural life.”
424 Gay, The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism, ix.
425 Idem., 214.
Chapter III:

Lies and Enlightenment

Introduction:

Halfway through the 1950s, Gay’s mistrust of radicalization landed him, as usual, in the midst of heated debate. From his study of German socialism, he came to perceive the eighteenth century as the most appealing narrative to bolster the postwar West. The Enlightenment, he claimed, was nothing less than the birth of modern western culture. His first book on the subject, *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist* (1959), was an intellectual biography of this *philosophe* as critic and campaigner for western values. Going against the grain of much scholarship, he interpreted Voltaire’s famous slogan “écrasez l’infâme” as a full-frontal attack on Christianity. More than a decade later, *Voltaire’s Politics* culminated in his synthesis of the period in *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1972). Comparing thinkers of Antiquity and the Renaissance with representatives of the Enlightenment in France, English, German, Italian, and the American colonies, the central message of Gay’s Enlightenment could not be mistaken: eighteenth century man gained the confidence to “make his own way”.

Gay’s alarming advocacy of eighteenth-century heritage was introduced at the battlefield of postwar American culture at the beginning of the Cold War. Émigré thought and a variety of narratives about causes and consequences of the catastrophe in Europe challenged American intellectual traditions. Twentieth-century ideology and its disappointments did not merely question liberal traditions like rationality and progress, but also stirred controversy about the “birth” of the modern world in the eighteenth century: “The influence of the European Enlightenment on America remains a matter of sustained, even angry, controversy.” In 1954 Gay wrote that Americans’ understanding of the Enlightenment was much less developed than the German and French

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427 Idem., 446.
reassessment of Voltaire of the last fifty years. His friend, the historian of the Enlightenment Arthur M. Wilson, asserted in 1966 that “American searchers and students” had for a generation believed that the thought of the French Enlightenment was perfunctory, flawed and “naive to the point of stupidity”. American scholars’ strong attacks from all sides put the Enlightenment at the center of the postwar reorientation of western culture.

This chapter reconstructs Gay’s growth as America’s principal supporter of a “transatlantic Enlightenment” as the founding narrative of postwar western culture. His involvement in the debate about western culture was an important catalyst for his work on the Enlightenment: “If there is an age that desperately needs the humane aims and the critical methods of the Enlightenment, it is certainly our age.” The historian’s view on the eighteenth century was presented in a strong relationship to the twentieth century. Ruth Gay noted that in “trying to find out the gap between 18th century knowledge and what we know today he is gradually developing himself into a polymath”. He set out to challenge his colleagues’ views on the eighteenth century from three different angles. In the first place, he criticized the idea that the Enlightenment was irrelevant to American history: “I am convinced that the American Enlightenment was not (as Boorstin puts it in a peculiarly unhappy phrase) a ‘myth’ but a reality, and that it arose in close conjunction with European philosophical as well as political developments. I hope to deal with aspects of it in a book on historians in colonial America which I am now finishing.” Gay pointed to the “Europeaness of American culture”:

“It is not, I trust, my professional deformation as a European historian that leads me to reject the exceptionalist thesis as stated most extravagantly by Daniel J. Boorstin, first in The Genius of American Politics (1953) and later in The Americans: The Colonial Experience (1958) and again in those extraordinary essays, at once anti-European and anti-intellectual, collected in America and The Image of Europe: Reflections on American Thought

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429 Arthur M. Wilson, “Speech”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2; Unprocessed.
431 “Letter of Ruth Gay to Gay”, 20 July 1961; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6; Unprocessed.
433 Idem., 447.
(1960). Louis Hartz divorces America from Europe. More reasonably and less cheerfully than Boorstin, in his influential *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955)."

Secondly, Gay’s belief in the relevance of the Enlightenment for American culture was substantiated by his denial that the *philosophes*’ thought was too naive or abstract, without any connection to the real world. Thirdly, the historian rejected critics’ understanding that twentieth-century totalitarianism originated in the *philosophes*’ abstractions, while there was no consensus as to whether the legacy of the Enlightenment had staged twentieth-century drama or just lost out to National Socialism.434

Gay perceived the search for the correlations between “morality” and “reality” to be at the core of the Enlightenment’s project. The confrontation between ideas and experience also molded Bernstein’s thought. Although the Enlightenment had not yet moved to the center of his research, he perceived Bernstein’s ideas in the tradition of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*.435 He believed that the *philosophes*’ skepticism about abstract thought was the right antidote to the era of war and ideology that he had witnessed. Therefore, he aimed to show that the *philosophes*’ campaign for the Enlightenment both questioned and bolstered postwar western culture: “There are some unique features of the American experience –properly located in space and time– as there are features that the Americans have in common with their European mother cultures.”436 While European culture could be an inspiration to postwar American intellectuals, it did not necessarily reflect their future. In the course of the 1950s he hoped to vitalize transatlantic understanding without lapsing in historical determination by developing his historical approach, grounded in the German tradition of historicism.

**The Enlightenment under Attack**

Although Gay’s historical writings would firmly hold the *philosophes*’ torch over decades to come, he seemed to stumble almost accidentally onto the subject in the 1950s. He called *Voltaire’s Politics* “a

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peculiar personal creation, a book I had not planned to write at all”. 437 When he started publishing on
the Enlightenment he was not a specialist of the period, he admitted. He had finished his dissertation
about Bernstein in 1952, but did not envisage continuing his explorations of German history. In his
memoirs, he denies that his biography of a Jewish and erstwhile Marxist “outsider” to German society
was really German history anyway. 438 While Bernstein offered an inspiring liberal example, he found a
book like Fritz Ringer’s Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-
1933 (1969) that grapples with the more problematic side of German history, utterly depressing. In his
review of the book, he pushed the reader into what he saw as the one ray of light: “In the midst of
reaction, complacency and myth-making, there were professors, not radicals but firmly within the
establishment, who broke loose from accepted commonplaces to make contributions to their
disciplines that remain of significance to this day.” 439 He perceived these few German professors to be
successors to the eighteenth-century philosopshes.

During a survey course on political theory that he had taught since 1950, Gay became
increasingly frustrated by the lack of systematic studies of political ideas of the eighteenth-century
philosophes: “that loose eighteenth century coalition of cultural critics, religious skeptics and political
reformers”. 440 During a year at Princeton as an Alfred Hodder fellow of the Council of the Humanities
in 1954, his interest in the Enlightenment became more grounded by his frequent discussions with
Columbia’s prominent specialist in European history, R.R. Palmer, who shared his colleague’s
transatlantic outlook. 441 During lunches, Gay would ask him: “Bob, tell me about history, Bob.” “What
kind of history?” “Oh, the Enlightenment, that’s what you know.” 442

Although Gay has often been accused of inconsistency in his views on the subject, the
continuity of his arguments on the Enlightenment, which he developed over a period of fifteen years,
is remarkable. All his later writings are imbued with the inflammatory call of one of his first articles

437 Gay, Voltaire’s Politics, xiii.
438 Gay, My German Question, 198.
441 R.R. Palmer, The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760 1800
442 Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
on the subject: “The last fifty years have been years of continuous disappointments—we have fought wars which we knew to be impossible, we have witnessed revolutions go sour and barbarisms brutal beyond imagination. Under these blows of reality many thoughtful people felt compelled to abandon the heritage of the eighteenth century.”

His defense of the eighteenth century led to confrontations with intellectuals from almost every political corner. The abundance and vehemence of these clashes illustrates the Enlightenment’s central position in American intellectuals’ postwar debate about western culture—and Gay’s polemical side: “Controversies about the Enlightenment are generally both historical and political.”

The historian firmly positioned himself in the contemporary revaluation of western intellectual and cultural traditions that examined ideas in their political context. Naturally, this often resulted in a simplification of historical complexity:

“I suppose if there is a single theme that runs through my work both as political scientist and historian it is not only the question of reason in society and in history but also an attempt to recognize the great complexities of the past. I’ve again and again paid close attention to the debates that historians have carried on with each other and for that matter contemporaries in their own time have carried on with each other.”

However, Gay’s dual aim to define contemporary relevance and historical complexity was sometimes hard to recognize in his contribution to historians’ debates. The controversy that catapulted him to prominence as a specialist of the eighteenth century concerned Carl Becker’s *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932). Becker’s book had an increasingly wide readership after the war. Its thesis that the Enlightenment was another “myth” with roots in medieval thought and religion, found wide acclaim among American scholars who questioned liberal culture. Gay pointed to the unassailable position of *The Heavenly City*, which continued to receive almost exclusively positive reviews. No major criticism was published and, what is more, it was favorably mentioned in “some distinguished and popular [American] textbooks”.

*The Heavenly City*, therefore, was influential

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445 “Letter to Glenda Sluga”, 9 February 1993; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2; Unprocessed.
446 Gay, “Carl Becker’s Heavenly City”, *n* 232.
beyond the borders of historical scholarship. A sympathizing critic compared the Enlightenment’s irrational force to the seductive powers of religion: “Surely only a religion can summon from men the profound and by no means wholly irrational energies required to destroy a religion.” Gay himself read *The Heavenly City* after the second or third time that he taught his survey course and thought it nothing less than “perverse”.

In his book, Becker accused the *philosophes* of political and historical ignorance, naive optimism and cold rationalism. While *The Heavenly City* preceded the widespread postwar assault on the Enlightenment, it stood in a long tradition that decried its accomplishments. Intellectuals like Alexis de Tocqueville, Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Meinecke had criticized the philosophes’ “otherworldly” thinking: “The *philosophes*, Meinecke tells us with decision, were guided by abstract universalism, and their ethics were in their deepest nature unpolitical”. At the beginning of the 1950s, there was a dissertation appearing at that time at the French Department that was “poverty stricken,” because it completely misinterpreted the political aspect of Voltaire’s thought.

Becker, Gay contended, too easily overlooked the Enlightenment’s novelty. He himself declared the Enlightenment to be a firm break with a religious past: “In a regime that was not yet modern, Voltaire was modern in his empiricism, his secularism, his humanitarianism, his hedonism.” During the upsurge of religious sentiment in the postwar period, some influential German émigrés, such as the political scientist Waldemar Gurian, advocated Christianity as the only real alternative to communism. But Gay maintained that the secular Enlightenment offered a much more instructive and inspiring narrative. According to him, the *philosophes* were the first modern democrats, installed by Diderot’s *Dictionnaire Philosophique*: “The first bomb thrown at the old regime.” In *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966), the first part of his synthesis of the period, he re-emphasizes this claim, which was earlier expressed in *Voltaire’s Politics*: “I still argue for discontinuity between Christianity and the Enlightenment.” Although there was, naturally, much rationality in the Middle-Ages,

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450 Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 337.
452 Quoted in *Voltaire’s Politics*, 3.
“philosophy was distinctly inferior to theology.” He concurred with *Annales*-historian Marc Bloch, whom he very much admired, that medieval man perceived himself still largely subjected to divine power.  

According to Gay, the popularity of Becker’s book gained from the strongly conservative tendency that he detected among postwar American historians, like John H. Hallowell and Russell Kirk: “The authors most responsible for perpetuating clichés about the Enlightenment are the so-called ‘New Conservatives […]’, who are now attempting to construct a conservative worldview by attacking the ideas which they attribute to Enlightenment political theorists.” The seduction of the masses in the twentieth century contributed to a fear of revolutionary rhetoric in postwar American scholarship: “Apart from a handful of stubborn exceptions like Georges Lefebvre, liberal historians have joined nostalgic royalists in condemning revolutionary rhetoric in tones of condescending amusement or unrelieved horror.” Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* (1953) compared “revolutionary enthusiasm with religious fervor”. This devaluation of the term “religion” was, according to Gay, for an important part responsible for the decline of respect for the Enlightenment. In American scholarship, expansive notions of religious sensibility were frequently relied on to illuminate the irrational factor in history before the widespread use of the concept of ideology in the 1950s and 1960s. The notion of a “secular religion gained too much weight,” according to Gay.

In a 1967 review of *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, George Mosse perceived Gay’s apparently still refreshing thesis that the Enlightenment formed a radical break:

“Historians usually obsessed with continuities, might well take note of this approach to intellectual history. Peter Gay in his work, even when he wrote about the irrational, has always demonstrated the importance of reason and

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454 Idem., 500.
457 Ibidem.
458 Molho and Berghahn, “Modern Europe in American Historical Writing”, p 383.
toleration, an opposition to fixed belief systems. His early work on the Enlightenment, it seems to me, set the tone, his refusal to see in the thought of the philosophers just another kind of religion.”

On Voltaire’s alleged religious sensibility, Gay noted: “We minimize, or we obscure, the significance of his conversion when we call him ‘really religious’.” The historian paired a criticism of postwar conservatives’ views on the Enlightenment to a reproach of radically leftist historical writings such as The Rise of European Liberalism (1936) by Harold Laski, Neumann’s supervisor in England, or progressive historians like Vernon P. Parrington’s Main Currents in American Thought (1927). These scholars agreed with Becker that the philosophes were too much rooted in the Middle Ages, but with a different political focus and agenda: they found that the philosophes were not revolutionary enough in their failure to respond to the needs of the lower classes.

Finally, Gay clashed with historians who saw the Enlightenment as a break, but interpreted this as the road to a deeply problematic modernity. He cut the eighteenth century loose at the other end as well. Although the philosophes were revolutionaries, their thought did not find its ultimate realization in the violence and radicalism of the French Revolution. He renounced historians who dared to cite the Enlightenment as a contributing factor of present-day ideological violence. He observed that it had become increasingly “fashionable to criticize the Enlightenment for producing what is called ‘the crisis of our time’.” Historians such as Lester G. Crocker, whose The Age of Crisis was published in 1959, found that the philosophes’ split between science and philosophy had disposed of Christian values, reducing reason to a systematic technique that would finally lead to a totalitarian mentality. The most significant representative of this thesis is Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944). Later Gay wrote about Dialectic of Enlightenment that it was “the most mischievous text I have ever read in the field of modern cultural history”. Like Adorno, the Israeli historian Jacob Talmon traced the paternity of twentieth-century dictatorships back to the French

philosophes. Talmon, a Polish émigré at Hebrew University, drew parallels between their “abstract” thinking and the thought of twentieth-century ideologues. Modern populism, he believed, originated in the philosophes’ campaign for freedom and equality. Notably in Irving Babbitt’s *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919), Jean Jacques Rousseau was portrayed as the “first totalitarian”, whose concept of the “general will” led to Robespierre’s dictatorship and culminated in the twentieth-century gulag.463

Gay’s defense of the philosophes was soon joined by American historians like Alfred Cobban, whose book *In Search for Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History* (1960) confronted Talmon’s view on the Enlightenment. Yet only Gay received such a diverse group of adversaries in his long career as champion of the eighteenth century. After the publication of the first part of Gay’s synthesis of the Enlightenment, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1967), Gay’s earlier mentor, R.R. Palmer wondered about the seeming inconsistency of his views on the Enlightenment as well; the historian could not understand why Gay called the philosophes a “little flock,” while he claimed that their ideas were widespread as well.464 The polemical tone of his work confused critics, who frequently simplified his views. Robert Darnton noted that Gay’s thesis “suffers from a tendency to exaggerate the Enlightenment’s radicalism”. Darnton alluded to his “completely secular view on the Enlightenment, non-Christian, and radically empirical in outlook”.465

However, it has often been overlooked, or misunderstood, that, similar to his Bernstein biography, Gay’s views on the Enlightenment reflected both its radicalism and moderation. In *Voltaire’s Politics*, he did not only present the Enlightenment as a break with the Middle Ages and pictured Voltaire as a revolutionary, but also called any intention to uproot Christianity in the eighteenth century “utopian policy”.466 The philosophe’s “radical impact on French politics” came predominantly from his “tirelessly preaching this modernity to others”. He emphasized the philosophe’s rootedness in French culture: “Voltaire was more than a spokesman, he was a creator. He

463 Gay noted: “Its objective consistency, let it be repeated, is not affected by the fact that his political thought has served individualists and collectivists, libertarians and totalitarians.” “Introduction”, *The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau* (New Haven, 1989, 1954) 27.
465 Darnton, “In Search for the Enlightenment”, 117.
466 Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 163.
did not only articulate sentiments that were already there.\textsuperscript{467} As is often the case, his statement here underlines the opposite point of view as well. In the collection of essays \textit{The Party of Humanity} (1964), His next book on the subject, he claimed: “The eighteenth century was not an age of crisis … but it was an age of readjustment in which the decline of Christian modes of thought produced a variety of naturalistic philosophies designed to replace the dying world view.”\textsuperscript{468} This intertwining of radicalism and historical complexity in his view on the Enlightenment was, as we shall see, no “inconsistency”, but a cultivation of inspired moderation. He intended to create an enlightened center that reflected a sense of historical complexity without losing its relevance to the present. The publication of \textit{Voltaire’s Politics} led one reviewer to remark that “in these times of fear,” it was “the first of the many merits of this excellent book that its author is not intimidated by the current fashion. He is unashamedly for the Enlightenment”.\textsuperscript{469}

\textbf{Revisiting German Historicism}

Halfway through the 1950s, Gay could not picture the philosophes’ relevance and rootedness in eighteenth-century society with the tools of much contemporary American scholarship. Scholars frequently disregarded the philosophes’ theoretical contributions. The Enlightenment’s definition of philosophy did, according to Gay, not correspond to the “traditional” one in the United States, which focused more exclusively on the rational quality of thought.\textsuperscript{470} He condemned Gustave Whitehead’s famous assertion in \textit{Science and the Modern World} (1925) that “les philosophes were not philosophers”\textsuperscript{471} Discussing the literature on the Enlightenment, he exclaimed: “None of these books is by a political theorist, and all of them are concerned with political theory only in passing.”\textsuperscript{472} There was a “stunning lack” of studies in English on the political thought of enlightened thinkers such as Voltaire, Jean le Rond d’Alembert, Denis Diderot, Claude Adrian Helvétius, Frederick the Great, and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[467] Idem., 42.
\item[471] Whitehead’s overall opinion of the Enlightenment was positive though. Quoted in “The Enlightenment in the History of Political Theory”, 374.
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David Hume: “These books point up just how small a contribution political theorists have made to the study of the Age of Reason.”

The attacks on the eighteenth century encouraged Gay’s awareness that the philosophes’ significance could not be grasped by prevailing methodology. He initially contemplated writing about second-rate Enlightenment thinkers such as Paul-Henri Thiry d’Holbach, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, a project that reflected the work of his friends at that time Fritz Stern and Richard Hofstadter, who respectively explored predecessors of National Socialism and the American Populist Movement. All these minor thinkers were considered representatives of broader cultural tendencies than “original” thinkers. The German socialist émigré and social psychologist Erich Fromm served as the main inspiration for this project. Gay’s early reading of pragmatist theory corresponded to his admiration for Fromm, who was one of the most visible members of the Frankfurt School in the United States. He used psychoanalysis to substantiate his optimistic view on man, emphasizing his capacities for love and reason. Influenced by Fromm, Gay himself planned to write a book on “love and politics”. His initial interest in Fromm echoed his attraction to Dewey’s optimism: “For a while I was persuaded by Dewey, but I gave that up during my graduate work at Columbia. I worked there with people who were not for that theory.” Again, it was Marcuse who intervened. In 1955, he replied to Fromm’s review of his book Eros and Civilization (1955) in Dissent, which contained a devastating critique of his thought. After reading Marcuse, Gay found that Fromm’s all too optimistic writings with its emphasis on progress constituted a basis for secular religion, because he failed to acknowledge that man’s flaws were an intrinsic part of human nature.

“For Fromm’s heart was in the right place, but heart was not what tough-minded social theorists wanted to depend on. To put it briefly and bluntly, for Fromm, the right kind of society would manage to overcome aggression, whereas for Marcuse, aggression was one of the givens of human nature.”

473 Ibidem.
475 Fromm published his own book The Art of Loving in 1956, in which he outlined his positive view of human nature.
476 Interview with the author, 23 January 2009.
In addition, the publication of the first volume of the critical edition of Voltaire’s letters convinced Gay to shift his attention to this *philosophe*. Central to his view on the Enlightenment was that Voltaire and his fellow *philosophes* represented a rare way of thinking that derived its strength from its foundation in their own experience. In *The Party of Humanity*, he explained his approach to Voltaire’s ideas: “We can now try to place Voltaire in his world, and to assess the relevance of his experience to his ideas.” 479 Contrary to many critics’ understanding, his scrutiny of Voltaire’s often ignored pamphlets, political writings, *Lettres Philosophiques* and *Histoire du Parlement de Paris* revealed a “political animal” that grounded his program in empiricism and political strategy. He turned against twentieth-century interpreters, who tended to mistake the *philosophe*’s common sense for conservatism or bourgeois ideology. 480

Although Gay’s historical approach became more fully developed in *Voltaire’s Politics*, his dissertation, inspired by German historicism, already praised a historical outlook at a moment when American intellectuals doubted its power. Bernstein considered Marx’ philosophy “above all a method of understanding history”, 481 rather than a rigid application of Marxian terminology and categories. Even though Gay adopted a more traditionally theoretical approach in his dissertation, his portrait of the socialist was shaped by a sense of historical complexity that opposed ideological thinking: “Historical truth should not be put in a straight jacket in order to fit the infinite variety of life to a single scheme.” 482 He would later agree to the observation of continuity in his own work: “As I look back on my work from an age of nearly 70, I see a certain continuity which I believe has not been manufactured retrospectively. The jump was not so great as it might seem, since after all I have been working from a historical perspective in the field of intellectual history for some years.” 483 Both his intellectual biographies of Bernstein and Voltaire aim to strike a balance between historical complexity and definition of morality, but in the course of the 1950s Gay increasingly became “more skeptical about what theory could do”. 484 Hans Kohn was one of the first to explain historians’ use of

480 Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 181.
482 Idem., 161.
484 Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
Geistesgeschichte and ideology by recognizing that in Germany the anti-intellectuals were not the mob but, as Gay came to agree, the cultured elite: “The balance between ideas and a certain degree of ‘Verstehen’, the shift from ideas and facts to ideology, was connected to the realization that the people who had been attracted to National Socialism were not only barbarians or the lower classes, manipulated by National Socialist propaganda, but also intellectuals and, especially, academics.”

German intellectuals’ seduction pointed to the irrational dimension of their thinking, which now needed further examination.

Significantly, in Voltaire’s Politics controversial German intellectual traditions helped him to explore the link between experiences and ideas to a larger extent than in his Bernstein biography. He examined this connection through the concept of ideology. When examining a particular Weltanschauung, a distinction is made between man’s rationality and irrationality, thinking and doing, politics and culture. Gay’s interpretation of the present crisis of western culture was deeply indebted to one of Burckhardt’s main successors in the field of Renaissance studies, the philosopher, cultural historian and German émigré Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945). Neumann first suggested that Gay should read Cassirer. In 1953 he assigned Gay to translate the philosopher’s The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau. In the introduction to this essay, his first published work on the Enlightenment, Neumann advised Gay to make a distinction between Rousseau’s political theory as a critical instrument and as a constructive device. The differentiation allowed him to see Rousseau’s ideas as inspiration for democratic movements but not as a blueprint for democratic states. The tension between the philosophes’ criticism of society and their sense of responsibility to construct useful narratives would structure Gay’s oeuvre on the Enlightenment. It enabled him to observe the “unity” of the philosophes’ thinking while historicizing their writings as well. Cassirer bolstered Gay’s appreciation of the Enlightenment as a “great reorientation in man’s view of life under way since the Renaissance.”

Cassirer’s cultural approach to the Enlightenment offered Gay an example how to examine the philosophes’ ideas. Cassirer’s work was first translated and became more and more known in the

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United States around the 1950s. The Problem of Knowledge, Philosophy, Science, and History was translated into English in 1950 and Myth of the State in 1946. Cassirer had written one of the few analyses of the Enlightenment that were translated into English (‘The Philosophy of the Enlightenment’ (1955), originally published in 1932 as “Die Philosophie der Aufklärung”). Although Gay did not personally get to know Cassirer, his intellectual legacy was omnipresent at Columbia, where the older émigré was a professor from 1944 till his death in 1945. He was convinced that the Warburg group could be “immensely valuable to American historians”, but even in 1967 he found the impact of Cassirer on American academia in general too minimal. Still, the philosopher formed a huge inspiration for a generation of German-American émigré historians, like Gay’s colleagues Paul Kristeller, Hans Baron, Ernst Panofsky and Felix Gilbert, to take Renaissance philosophy seriously. Gay was particularly acquainted with Renaissance historians such as Kristeller and Gilbert, who have been regarded as the most successful German émigré historians in the United States. They virtually established the Renaissance as a popular field of historical research. He admired Panofsky, who bolstered his thesis that the eighteenth century formed a “break” with the Middle Ages.

Cassirer’s broadening of the concept of politics first convinced Gay of Voltaire's eye for political reality. The philosopher’s cultural approach to politics opened the door to a more nuanced rationalization of man’s need for myth. In many ways, Cassirer shared Adorno and Horkheimer’s aspiration of grasping National Socialism in focusing on the politics of myth. These two members of the Frankfurt School constructed a dialectical Enlightenment that assumed that myth was capable of advancing the philosophes’ project; they insisted that myth is indispensible for a culture. However, they maintained a definition of “high culture” that was to a large degree centered around notions of individuality and authenticity. Unrestrained by other cultural forces, cultural mythmaking could more

487 Richard Löwenthal noted on Cassirer’s popularity: “I look forward to the time when people will contradict the smooth critics who see in Ernst Cassirer the non plus ultra of philosophical thinking in this epoch. Quoted in James Schmidt, “The Eclipse of Reason and the End of the Frankfurt School in the United States”, Richard Bodek and Simon Lewis (eds.), The Fruits of Exile. Central European Intellectual Emigration to America in the Age of Facism (Columbia, 2010) 1-28, 1.
488 Gay, A Loss of Mastery, 123.
easily form a threat to this understanding of high culture. Contrary to Adorno and Horkheimer, Cassirer stressed that the acceptance that irrationality was an intrinsic part of human nature and did not necessarily have to lead to pessimism about the power of rationality. He enlarged the definition of “culture” through his examination of the function of ideas in a broader historical context. In the 1920s Cassirer’s focus on the functionality of ideas offered a way out of the persistent debate on the reliability of historical knowledge that dominated historical discourse. The philosopher noted: “The historian of ideas is not asking primarily what the substance is of particular ideas. He is asking what their function is. What he is studying – or should be studying – is less the content of ideas than their dynamics.” In his essay “The Social History of Ideas” (1966), Gay noted that Cassirer preferred to search for a seeming contradiction in a thinker’s thought. Examining the connections between his thought and life, he was able to discover a “vital center, a core at once emotional and intellectual”. In this way, Cassirer sought to encapsulate the whole human experience: a combined analysis of theory and practice, rationality and irrationality, increased his ability to achieve “objective” knowledge, even though he was aware that he didn’t reach this goal completely.

Gay values Cassirer’s aim to define the Enlightenment, instead of merely highlighting its internal differences, above all other work on the period. Cassirer’s probing of ideas in the historical context bolstered his sense of historical discontinuity between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment: “I still argue for a discontinuity especially radical when we judge ideas by their function, not by their origins.” His functionalist approach to ideas allowed Cassirer to insist that the politics of myth in the form of National Socialism were not illustrations of the failure of western reason, as Adorno and Horkeimer did, but of the failure of culture. His acceptance of mythmaking as a universal human need entailed his conviction that it could be used for liberal purposes as well. Man’s capacity for mythmaking was one step removed from the idea that history was determined by God or

495 Gay, The Rise of Modern Paganism, 462. According to Gay, the origins of ideas may be a clue to their function, but they do not determine it: “Christianity made a substantial contribution to the philosophes’ education, but of the definition of the Enlightenment it forms no part.” The Rise of Modern Paganism, 323.
abstract forces. So in Cassirer’s philosophy, “symbolic” thinking reflected man’s creative empowerment: “Cassirer’s ‘Philosophie der symbolischen Formen’ is a monumental portrait of man as symbolizing, world-shaping animal.”496 Man was the “animal symbolicum”, fit to shape his own historical circumstances. Cassirer, therefore, put the “imagination” back into the service of the Enlightenment: “He finds a basic attitude that had usually been reserved for the Romantics”.497 Gay agreed that the Enlightenment “joined to a degree scarcely ever achieved before, the critical with the productive function and converted the one directly into the other”.498 We have seen that Neumann had first taught Gay that the philosophes themselves did not draw a strict distinction between criticism and construction; both were part of their intellectual project.

Consequently, Gay attributed scholars’ misunderstanding of the Enlightenment to their frequent negligence of the philosophes’ ideological dispute with the German Romantics: “The philosophes had no monopoly on wisdom or impudence; the orthodox had no monopoly on charity or ignorance. The two parties represented two worldviews.”499 According to Gay, the Romantics made an influential caricature of the philosophes: “In fact, we do not see the Enlightenment directly but through the eyes of the Romantic period.”500 They criticized the philosophes for “failing to do justice to the irrational nature of power–dismissed their political judgments as Utopian, unrealistic, unpertinent”, resulting in a “self-satisfied historicism”.501 In sum, the “German Stürmer und Dränger repudiated Voltaire as a son repudiates his father to gain maturity”.502 Such references show that he had already began to use Freudian insights in his analysis of the political battle of ideas.

Not only the Romantics, but also the philosophes simplified the ideas of the Enlightenment in their campaign. Gay explicitly calls Voltaire an “ideologue”:503 “Propaganda cannot be effective without oversimplification, without distortion.”504 Rather than dismissing Voltaire’s campaign, Gay considered it proof of the philosophes’s concern with the effectivity of his ideas. In his later synthesis,
he shows that the *philosophes*’ battling spirit did make their ideas relevant to the needs of their own
time: “They could not grant that philosophical Christians or Stoic Christians were men with a coherent
worldview, and it was precisely this failure that freed the Enlightenment from diffidence and made it
revolutionary.”505 In turn, Gay explained, the *philosophes* were unfair in their attacks on the
Romantics: “écacez l’infâme” was “a propagandist’s half-truth, silent on the civilizing labors of the
Christian tradition, silent on the benign behavior of ecclesiastics through the ages, silent on the
advancement of learning under the auspices of Christian schools and universities”.506 In *Voltaire’s
Politics*, Gay noted that “the very defects of Enlightenment history are instructive, particularly since
they help us to understand the position of propaganda, this was part of their unrelenting struggle
against authorities”.507

Therefore, interpreters of the Enlightenment needed to carefully analyze the connections
between his thought and his campaign. In his later synthesis he noted that the Enlightenment, in spite
of its many deficiencies, distinguished itself from the thought of eighteenth-century Christians and that
of twentieth-century ideologues, because it comprised “a purely human struggle, open to scientific
inquiry and criticism”.508 In *Voltaire’s Politics*, the *philosophe* emerged as a “sincere ideologist”,
whose campaign for Enlightenment was strongly rooted in daily practice and observation: “Like all
ideologists, Voltaire exaggerated his disinterestedness; unlike many ideologists, Voltaire was
sincere.”509 In the connection between ideas and empiricism, the philosophes did not idealize the
power of reason: “It was a political demand for the right to question everything, rather than the
assertion that everything could be known or mattered by rationality. It was, in fact, a central concern
of their philosophizing to find and establish the limits of reason.”510

Still, the popularity of National Socialist mythology compelled Gay to voice harsh criticism of
the cultural constructions of German historians, which Cassirer’s work had not yet fully absorbed.

Historical examination of irrationality should avoid constructing myth itself. The conflicting views of

506 Idem., 248.
509 Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 141.
two significant historians underlined the diversity of the responses to the rise of National Socialism in postwar-America: while Arthur Lovejoy argued for an exclusively rational approach to ideas, the émigré Hajo Holborn suggested a further contextualization of thought. Lovejoy’s “History of Ideas” formed an influential statement on the twentieth-century sprawl of irrationality that shaped the field at American universities for at least a generation.\footnote{Stefan Collini, “What is Intellectual History?”, \textit{History Today}, Vol. 35, No. 10 (October 1985) 46-54. \url{http://www.historytoday.com/stefan-collini/what-intellectual-history}} The historian maintained that ideas should be examined outside their historical context. In the 1940s his advocacy of “Atlantic History” shifted attention away from the empiricist tradition that dominated American scholarship and prompted the founding of the \textit{Journal of Intellectual Ideas}.\footnote{Guggisberg, “The Uses of the European Past in American Historiography”, 16.} Gay considered Lovejoy’s essay “Present Standpoints and past History” (1959) the most sensible attack on a relativism that often amounted to “useless truism:” “It is the public nature of our discipline that makes relativism relatively harmless.”\footnote{Gay, \textit{The Rise of Modern Paganism}, 19.} In “The Social History of Ideas”, Gay argues against some American intellectuals’ preference for historical complexity: “Terms like subtlety, ambivalence, irony, dialectic, all terms with a long, honorable history, have become the clichés of our time.”\footnote{Gay, “The Social History of Ideas”, 106.} Lovejoy’s “unit-ideas” substantiated his belief in the use of “radical” theoretical traditions; he renounced Becker’s exclusive treatment of ideas and ideology as dressed up base concerns, instead of studying them as serious political theory: “Ideas are a link in a procession, they have an inner logic, an intrinsic worth and individual character.”\footnote{Gay, “The Social History of Ideas”, 112.} Intending to provide historical definitions, prevented the historian from lapsing into a complexity that made the past irrelevant to the present. Burckhardt “invented” the Renaissance, because he dared to define it: “What the critics of Burckhardt have in common is a failure to see both the function of labels and the function of ideas.”\footnote{Ibidem.} Cassirer shared Burckhardt’s ability “to find order in seeming chaos”.\footnote{Gay, \textit{The Party of Humanity}, xi.} Mosse claimed that Lovejoy’s neglect of the historical context insulated American intellectual history:
“Arthur Lovejoy wrote…. that ideas are derived from philosophic systems and he adds that logic is one of the most important operative factors in the history of thought. He warned of giving the non-rational too much place in the new discipline. How strange and isolated even such intellectual Americans must have been in the 1930s! For most of the world was in the grip of irrational systems which had, to be sure, a logic of their own but not one opposed to irrationalism.”

Mosse detected in Lovejoy’s exclusive focus on rationality the hazard of a similar delusion that he observed in Daniel Bell’s thesis of an American cultural state “beyond ideology”; both intellectuals were making too rigid distinctions between “western” and ideological ideas. Gay granted that Lovejoy’s “unit-ideas” were too closely allied to his history of philosophy and too prone to treat ideas as independent, unchanging entities. According to him, a historian like Jacob Talmon, who detected a continuity between the Enlightenment and totalitarianism, had lost sight of ideas’ historical meaning, exactly because he overestimated the autonomy of ideas. Holborn shared Gay’s reservations in his essay “German Idealism in the Light of Social History” (1952), to which Gay refers in Voltaire’s Politics. Holborn asserted that Ranke’s historical approach and the tradition of Geistesgeschichte were not sufficient to comprehend the Third Reich; ideas should be examined in their political and social contexts, as well. Although Cassirer’s philosophy was already turning away from purely Idealist methodology in the German 1920s, Gay still spurned the philosopher’s “s slighting of materialism”. He claimed: “One should now abandon Cassirer’s unpolitical Idealism –in the name, and by the light, of another aspect– his pragmatic functionalism.” In the extensive bibliography of Voltaire’s Politics, he alluded to the German historian’s work as “a typical product of German Geistesgeschichte–far more metaphysical than Voltaire would have liked”.

So after his Bernstein biography, Gay did not only develop a cultural but also a social approach to ideas. In The Party of Humanity, he defined his “social history of ideas” as “a

518 George Mosse, quoted in Karel Plessini, The Perils of Normalcy, 57.
519 Dietle and Micale, “Peter Gay: A Life”, 5.
521 Gay, Voltaire’s Politics, 43.
523 Idem., 123.
524 Gay, Voltaire’s Politics, 360-1.
combination of Lovejoy and Weber”; ideas are social products, but, “and here I departed from the Marxists […]. I insisted that ideas powerfully act upon, often decisively shape, the very culture from which they have emerged.” He advocated a “kind of Intellectual history [that] is guided by a single, simple principle: ideas have many dimensions.” He wanted to discover “following Ranke, how things had really been, how mental products – ideas, religious and political and aesthetic postures – had originated and would define their shape under the impress of social realities”. He understood that ideas emerge from an “intricate social texture rootedness – cultural, religious, political – that provides them with their vocabulary and dictates their contemporary importance”. While the *philosophes*’ campaign was an essential part of his appreciation for the Enlightenment, he fully agreed with Holborn’s statement that the analysis of ideas’ link to a social context offered a better understanding of their political limitations: “Social history is the necessary complement to the history of ideas.”

Increasingly, more American historians came to appreciate some German intellectual traditions as the solution to the contemporary problems of modernity, instead of perceiving them as the culprit of modern war and ideology. For an important part due to the efforts of émigré scholars such as Gay, Cassirer, Holborn and Gilbert, the German cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt reached canonical status among American cultural historians to guide their search for cultural explanations of America’s postwar position. American historians had always appreciated Burckhardt more than his compatriots had done; in the nineteenth century, more Americans than Germans had studied with the cultural historian. After 1945 even the German historian Friedrich Meinecke wondered if Jacob Burckhardt’s cultural history wasn’t more important than the in Germany traditionally much more celebrated Leopold von Ranke with his emphasis on the state. With his deep pessimism regarding power, the state, and the masses, Burckhardt had foreseen twentieth-century barbarity more clearly than Ranke.

525 Idem., xv.
528 Higham, 342.
Voltaire’s Style

A reviewer of *Voltaire’s Politics* criticized Gay’s exploration of the *philosophe’s* political maneuvering: “Politics were not the object of Voltaire’s genius.” But influenced by German intellectuals like Cassirer, Gay took a much broader approach to politics in his exploration of Voltaire’s “style”. The historian’s analysis of style called attention to the historicity of ideas: style “reaches out into the culture in which it exists, from which it draws and on which it imprints its characteristic shape, and into the past, to its antecedents.” He noted: “Rhetoric may change while ideas persist.”

In his dissertation, Gay’s preference for Bernstein’s modesty and honesty as a recipe against demagoguery testified to a still persistent fear of the link between politics and art. In *Voltaire’s Politics*, Gay still noted that art and politics were often associated with twentieth-century German disaster: “Literature and art effectively diffused the cult of Germanism among the population at large.” But while Bernstein failed to win popular support, observing that the masses were seduced by National Socialist myth, Gay found in Voltaire an example of an intellectual who overcame the traditional opposition between intellectual theory and the irrational “needs of the public”. Voltaire skillfully played the power of art to make his ideas effective. Bernstein’s search for the relationship between “principles and power” was in *Voltaire’s Politics* defined in terms of a more individualized role-play: the *philosophe* emerged in the dual role of critic and creator of inspiring symbols. In Gay’s synthesis of the Enlightenment, this dialectical movement was the center of the *philosophes’* anti-ideological morality: “the Enlightenment may be summed up in two words: criticism and power”.

Gay came to see the *philosophes* as men of letters, for whom an active cultivation of style to exercise this power was essential. The literary historian Erich Auerbach adjusted his textual interpretations of Voltaire’s work. He read Auerbach’s masterpiece *Mimesis* in 1954: “It was a
revelation, and for years I sought an opportunity to apply to historical writings the lessons of this inspired masterpiece, at once philology and sociology.”

Like Gay, Auerbach was concerned with the analysis of both high and low literary styles. In *Voltaire's Politics*, he praises Auerbach’s “brilliant analysis” of Voltaire’s metaphorical language: “a linguistic analysis in the tradition of the Austrian-American scholar and literary critic Leo Spitzer ... who had considerable impact on me.”

So Gay underscored that Voltaire defended his program of social reform, his “great trinity—toleration, freedom, and the Rule of Law”, with “slogans”, witticisms or parables. His “revolutionary” rhetoric was designed to make the Rule of Law, which implied that a nation was governed by law, more appealing. He praises the “tireless preaching” of this “evangelist of enlightenment” and refers to Voltaire’s speeches as “sermons”: not to downplay the revolutionary significance of his thinking, but rather to dialectically draw attention to the differences between the *philosophe*’s critical campaign and religion. Although there was no fundamental distinction between the two: the function of their preaching made all the difference.

Toleration, another principle of Voltaire’s “social program”, seems to be an unlikely quality of an ardent campaigner. In a review, Palmer noted that the *philosophes* “did not have any patience with relativist ideas or a morality that looked with any favor on compromise or reconciliation.” But although Voltaire’s “malicious” streak compelled him sometimes to discuss the matter more ambiguously, Gay showed that Voltaire’s tolerance reflected his practical inclination, which maintained that if you want to prevent “a sect from overthrowing the state, use tolerance.” He discovered that Voltaire’s ideas about a tolerant open society first originated in his own observations during his travels in England. Voltaire’s “Anglomania” had inspired his writings on French law.

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539 Idem., 31.
540 Gay went against Cassirer’s claim that not Voltaire’s references to Natural Law, but rather to the Rule of Law should be interpreted as “rhetoric”; Voltaire was fully committed to the Rule of Law, which he called a “rational guide in an irrational world”. The Rule of Law’s undogmatic character makes this theory, according to Gay, “less exciting and less useful in times of stress.” Idem., 131.
541 Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 206.
543 Idem., 299.
Moreover, he was tolerant of homosexuals, suicide and sorcery, and spoke with “an amused indifference to the perversities of his fellow men.”\textsuperscript{544} He rejected the death penalty.

Gay admitted that the *philosophe’s* valuation of freedom, the last principle of his program, was often veiled in the tension with the need for effective action.\textsuperscript{545} The *philosophe’s* relations to the monarchy are well known. However, he showed that these alliances with power most of all testified to the *philosophe’s* eye for political reality, which did not contradict that his “first and most important battle was against censorship.”\textsuperscript{546} We have seen that it was Neumann who had enlightened him about the *philosophes’* strategic choice to ally themselves to powerful monarchs, such as Catherine the Great, to realize his program. Neumann’s “brilliant”\textsuperscript{547} essay on Montesquieu taught him that at the time the *Thèse Royale* was the only realistic option for the *philosophes* to adopt, since the *Thèse Nobiliaire* was no more than an ideology for special interests, while Rousseau’s egalitarianism was “utopian” and not intended for France. It is true that Voltaire did not see democracy work in France, but this did not mean that he disliked the whole concept. According to Gay, Voltaire learned from his own experiences and changed his ideas about *le peuple*, moving from “unqualified contempt to grudging respect”.\textsuperscript{548} While he used to identify the masses with passion and the educated classes with reason, he finally admitted that they, too, possessed a degree of rationality.\textsuperscript{549} Voltaire’s alliances with “enlightened despotism” illustrated, in Gay’s view, pure political pragmatism that concealed his pursuit of freedom.\textsuperscript{550} As early as in his Bernstein biography, Gay claimed that governmental control was not a totalitarian invention, but could serve to protect freedom, as well: “History’s most important lesson is that men need institutions to master their passions and regulate their conflicts.”\textsuperscript{551} He underlined the historical complexity of the eighteenth century, not to lapse into a moral relativism but

\textsuperscript{544} Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 289-90.  
\textsuperscript{545} Idem., 15.  
\textsuperscript{546} Idem., 206.  
\textsuperscript{547} Idem., 333. Gay refers here to Franz Neumann’s essay “Montesquieu” in *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State*, which ten years earlier introduced him to the These Royale.  
\textsuperscript{548} Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 259.  
\textsuperscript{549} Idem., 227.  
\textsuperscript{550} Idem., 178-9. In the 1930s an international group of historians under the supervision of Michel Lléritier that started to examine “enlightened despotism”, but “most of them assume as given the very thing that needs to be proved—the existence of a particular kind of monarchy that can be categorized with the single phrase ‘enlightened despotism’”. *Voltaire’s Politics*, 383.  
\textsuperscript{551} Gay, *The Dilemma of Social Democracy*, 145.
rather to reveal the central meaning of the Enlightenment: the cardinal question of the eighteenth century was how to find a “proper sphere” and “justified boundaries” of freedom. 552

**Voltaire in the Cold War**

In postwar American historical scholarship there were, besides Gay, other scholars who perceived that democracy should be permanently defended against its enemies. Gay’s colleague, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., noted that “our problem is to make democracy the fighting faith”. 553 However, the historical approach that Gay developed halfway the 1950s, his “combination of Lovejoy and Weber” was no reflection of liberal superiority; it composed a transatlantic center between a liberal and Marxist approach that stressed both the autonomy and relativity of the philosophs’ ideas. The dynamics of the European-American relationship in his work constituted the contemporary relevance of the Enlightenment: while the eighteenth-century battle of ideas taught American intellectuals that liberalism was not self-evident, “American” liberalism, represented by Gay’s preference for the Enlightenment, reassured European intellectuals that democratic liberalism was possible. “Western” culture appears in his writings as an ardent campaign for universal values, whose cultural style was critically historicized at the same time. *Voltaire’s Politics* developed the traditional dynamics between particularity and universality in the tradition of German historicism through his “social history of ideas”. Therefore, German historicism, which Lovejoy and many social historians of the 1960s found suspect, now encouraged a democratic culture. Gay was keen on presenting the West as a conflict as well as defining it: the Enlightenment came to its own in its campaign. Therefore, western institutions were no “models” for the rest of the world, even though *Voltaire’s Politics* was written in defense of the Enlightenment: “The institutions of Englishmen could serve as standards to other states, but not as models; what was appropriate to one country might not be appropriate to another.” 554 The historian has called *Voltaire’s Politics* a “special favorite of mine”, because he had “said something about

Voltaire’s experiences in France, Russia, England, Geneva that had never been said before.  
Like Bernstein, Voltaire’s biography connected the continent to the Anglo-American world, and even to the future enemy during the Cold War, which reflected Gay’s own ambitions to counter Manichaean thinking.

Gay’s defense of the Enlightenment did not betray an uncritical predisposition for American or European culture, which is also evident from his only book exclusively dedicated to American history: *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* (1968). This short book discusses Puritan historians’ first exile in New England in the seventeenth century. While Bernstein and Voltaire’s experiences in exile reflected fruitful interactions with continental and Anglo-Saxon culture, Gay was more critical about Puritan historians’ impact on American culture. Connecting the European and American past, the historian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) is the “last medieval historian”. Cassirer’s distinction between “mythical” and “critical” thinking, so central in much of Gay’s work, is discussed in yet another setting here. In *A Loss of Mastery*, Gay questions Perry Miller’s quintessential work, *The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century* (1939), which disputes the Puritans’ debt to European intellectual traditions.  
Examining their thought and responses to American society, he responded that European Protestantism had deeply impregnated Puritans’ thinking. He claimed that their religious outlook impeded the development of a political strategy to achieve their goals in American exile: “the American Puritans faced a dilemma from which there was no escape, the dilemma that besets all Utopians unfortunate enough to secure power.”  
The historian compares these “impractical” Puritans to another European influence, the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, who “embraced and created the modern world”.

Similar to his work on the Enlightenment, Gay received criticism that he offered a stereotyped picture of Puritan historians, singling out the aspects that confirmed his own secular views. In his

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555 Gay notes: “An ordinary citizen of London, Geneva and Amsterdam had more opportunity to enlighten himself than in France or Russia in Geneva.”; Letter to Adélaïde Barbey”, 27 september 1991; Peter Gay Papers; Box 3.2.
558 Idem., 93.
bibliographical essay to *A Loss of Mastery*, he himself notes that the historian’s objectivity is always disputed by his ideology or character. In addition, at the beginning of the book he refers to “the many thousands of pilgrims, Jewish and not Jewish, German and Austrian and Polish, whom Hitler compelled to discover America—to the memory of my father who never made a good living here but so passionately loved his adopted country that he could not bear to hear it criticized”. But instead of merely testifying to his own subjectivity, this statement consciously puts Gay’s examination of the Puritans in a contemporary context, when American culture was flooded by European influences. Paradoxically, his statement about the tragic fate of twentieth-century exiles is followed by an invitation to critically examine the Puritan exiles’ influences. In this manner, he shows that empathy and critical distance should go together, urging contemporary intellectuals to question the émigré influences on their thinking. While this impact is not specified here, we will later see that he referred here specifically to Adorno and Habermas’ *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

*Voltaire’s Politics* shows a similar dialectic between the past and the present as *A Loss of Mastery* and much of Gay’s other work. In his essay, “America the Paradoxical” (1976), he notes that the Enlightenment reflected the “American-European symbiosis”. According to the historian, the European and the American Enlightenment have often mistakenly been associated with the contrast between “theory” and “practice”. Instead, the dynamics between the two shaped both movements: “We might well define the Enlightenment as the search for a theory of practice, as the organized habit of criticism.”

The Enlightenment, therefore, embodied the successful historical exchange between European and American intellectuals:

“It is obvious that the rebellious colonists learned from Europeans; it is less obvious, though no less true, that Europe learned from the colonists. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man is only the most famous example of this reciprocal traffic. Skepticism and criticism of the American experiment came later, as the promising, glorious offspring came to behave more or less as like other imperfect humans. And this interchange, this repayment of Americans for the great gifts of European speculation and style, was possible precisely

because ideas and actions on both sides of the Atlantic belonged to the same family of experience.”

Gay admitted that the United States embodied in many ways the more successful realization of the Enlightenment. So after the Second World War “Europe provided a usable past for the Americans, while America provided a usable present for the Europeans.” The European battle between the Enlightenment and authoritarianism reminded postwar American intellectuals that liberalism was not undisputed. At the same time, the achievements of the American Enlightenment encouraged European intellectuals that the philosophs’ ideals could work in practice.

But although Gay believed that the Enlightenment still provided the most appealing narrative to counter ideological thinking, he acknowledged that it had not met all the challenges of the twentieth century. On the one hand, Voltaire’s program did not appeal enough to the “irrational” side of the masses, on the other hand, the philosophe’s fabrication of a functional myth persisted. Voltaire never gained enough trust in the masses to embrace democracy. He did not really become a convinced democrat nor appreciated or even understood Rousseau’s “volonté générale.” Although Voltaire continually affirmed that men must be told the truth, he praised the efficacy of lies. In his Bernstein biography, Gay already referred to the complexity of the enlightened cause: “There are times and conditions when the intellectual serves the truth best by lying.” The tension between lies and Enlightenment continued to pierce the problematic heart of his campaign. In spite of the large appeal of Voltaire’s writings, Gay admitted that the education of the masses, which formed such an important dilemma in the twentieth century, was “the great unexamined political question of the Enlightenment.” Yet the philosophe did take a first step out of the dilemma between the need for Enlightenment and the need for social religion, through a “crude deism”, which rejects mysteries, saints, relics, pilgrimages, transubstantiation or consubstantiation and church hierarchies. Voltaire did believe in God, but introduced an anthropocentrism.

561 Gay, “America the Paradoxical”, 847.
562 Ibidem.
563 Gay, Voltaire’s Politics, 237.
564 Gay, The Dilemma of Social Democracy, 86.
The second step out of this dilemma, Gay noted, was Voltaire’s definition of progress, not as belief but as the product of human effort. The *philosophes* did not embrace the illusion of salvation: “Life is a shipwreck, but we can try to save ourselves.” Voltaire’s support of gradual reform was expressed through his persuasion of the powerful and his education of the public: “In time, they would transcend even Voltaire’s noble, simple, majestic lie.” Still, he never completely “liberated himself from the idea that the canaille deserved a social religion, a ‘noble lie’ that was more ‘vulgar’ than the ‘true faith’ of the philosophers.” While he considered being “vulgar” in this context not as a “true” insult, he admitted that the *philosophe*’s “social imagination was indeed limited, as both his conviction that poverty was inescapable and his ideas about equality highlight.” Voltaire was not a perfect liberal model. But this did not discredit his project, because it should encourage future intellectuals’ battle for a “better modernity”. In “Light on the Enlightenment”, Gay’s answer to the flaws and “failure” of the enlightened tradition in the twentieth century was “that one must confront the world and dominate it, that the cure for the ills of modernity is more, and the right kind of modernity”. His focus on Voltaire’s campaign to defend his liberal ideals historicized the Enlightenment, but his polemical and practical “style” clearly defined its ongoing contemporary relevance. Therefore, the “right kind of modernity” was, according to the historian, the development of Voltaire’s skilled campaign for liberal values. The Enlightenment merely begins with the *philosophes* and will “eventually trickle down to the educated classes, the bourgeoisie and the people.” Ultimately, the poor would benefit from lenient punishments, public trials, presumption of innocence, review of sentences, tax reforms, public works, free speech and toleration, as education spread. In *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, therefore, Gay claims that the wish to educate in order to gradually achieve political power is the “logic implicit” in the Enlightenment; even the *philosophes’* own “pursuit of modernity” was in many ways the product of their own education in the critical thinking of Antiquity.

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567 Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 44.
568 Idem., 54.
So in its ability to picture historical complexity without losing contemporary relevance, historical writing could form a basis of postwar morality that theory alone could not. While the rise of ideologies had broken the connections between human experience and ideas, the otherwise critical Darnton praised Gay’s views on the Enlightenment for relating ideas to experience, bringing back “the complex human dimension of philosophy.” His scholarly approach also allowed him to preserve a focus on ideas, while a later generation of historians turned to social history. Historical research could more fully determine which specific ideas were useful and which weren’t: “Good theory must work and be tested in practice; the theory that will not work in practice is simply a bad theory.” Although Gay’s move to the History Department in 1956 had many reasons, it also reflected and fuelled the central place that historical research played in his effort to energize postwar liberalism: “Before long I wondered how I had ever felt at home among political scientists. I still wonder about it sometimes.”

**History and Psychoanalysis**

In the course of the 1960s Gay’s development of a cultural-psychological approach re-launched the tension between “lies” and “Enlightenment”. *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966) and *The Science of Freedom* (1969) formed the two parts of his synthesis *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. These works provided a more international, interdisciplinary perspective on the Enlightenment than *Voltaire’s Politics* and *The Party of Humanity*. In these earlier works, Voltaire’s “representation” to a large extent defines the Enlightenment. He “did not encompass all the aspects of the Enlightenment: there were philosophical currents of which he remained unaware”:

“Yet, he embodies the most characteristic features of the French Enlightenment—and indeed the European Enlightenment as a whole. He preached the omnipotence of criticism and argued that nothing, least of all religion and politics, should escape the scrutiny of rational reformers. He believed that the true purpose of

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571 Darnton, “In Search for the Enlightenment”, 114.
572 Gay, “America the Paradoxical”, 850.
thought was rights action, but he did not expect that all mysteries or all evils would yield to human rationality: the world, in his eyes, was a desert which man must make habitable by his efforts and endure with his humor.”575

In 1952, the year he finished his dissertation, Gay already stated his goal to construct the “spirit” of the time: “The first-rate historian must penetrate to the essential character of the period about which he writes; and disclose the basic realities of which the surface events are the reflection.”576 The German émigré and literary critic Leo Spitzer (1888-1960), who influenced Gay, referred more explicitly to German culture in this respect:

“There have been, God knows, many Fabrikate, of more or less recent German make, in which the pursuit of the integration of features of detail into one whole has served as an excuse for confusion and muddled thinking–so rightly condemned by Professor Lovejoy. But such writings should not be allowed to discredit the legitimate endeavors of a Burckhardt, a Dilthey, a Simmel, a Max Weber, a Trölsch. There is nothing fraudulent or even revolutionary in a procedure which seeks to seek wholes […].”577

In Voltaire’s Politics, the individual representation of the philosophe’s character and experiences allowed him to picture the historical complexity of the eighteenth century, as well. Gay considered his philosophe a Weberian, international ideal type and refused to italicize the word: “It is a French word for an international type for which there is no precise equivalent in English.”578 In his synthesis, however, he became more ambitious; he rejected the tendency to “reduce history to biography, and thus to sacrifice unity to variety”.579 His cultural approach was certainly encouraged by his position in American academia from the beginning of his scholarly career, especially since he rejected the scholarship of contemporary conservative historians in Germany. Gay’s work fell between two generations of German historians, since he did not identify with the attitudes towards the German past

577 Spitzer, “Geistesgeschichte vs. History of Ideas as Applied to Hitlerism”, 203.
of the first and the scholarly approach of the second. The writings of American scholars indicated that cultural history could be employed in a liberal context at a time when in Germany a new generation of historians increasingly turned to the research of social history. Fuelled by the integrating concept of Western culture, his teaching of both American and European political thought led to his close connections to the interdisciplinary ideals of the American Studies movement:

“No doubt, American historians were virtually all of them inclined to see American studies, an invention of the 1930s, as a problem child. But, to do it justice, it was devised as a protest against what was widely perceived as pedantic academic specialization. The inescapable professionalization of the historical craft, the divisions into highly concentrated fields defined by country, century and activity, had generated a measure of discontent on the part of those who came to think that such a fine division of labor was destroying the living substance of the past.”

Moreover, Gay was attracted to the more theoretical approach of American literary scholars such as Lionel Trilling and the cultural historian Jacques Barzun, who taught at Columbia’s History Department in the 1950s. He became inspired by Trilling’s dominating presence in the Columbia community: “He lived in our neighborhood, and his collection of essays, The Liberal Imagination, had been influential on us, and, incidentally, he was the first Jew to get tenure in Columbia’s English department.” Barzun and Trilling held conservative views that were rare among liberal scholars in the United States: “The Liberal Imagination was important to me. It is funny to say this after Reagan, but it seemed to be right what he was saying, that American culture had only one idea and should know about conservatism.” Gay believed that Barzun had to offer something that was “original”: “I thought that he had interesting ideas, for example that romanticism was a good idea.” In Romanticism Barzun found a breeding ground for democratic theory. Like Cassirer, the historian zoomed in on a period’s “cultural style”: “a pose or stance adopted to meet the common needs of an

582 Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
Barzun’s cultural history inspired Gay, although, unlike Stern, he was not one of his students: “That was in 1961, when the ideals of cultural history had certainly seized our group. What matters here is that Stern was a student of Jacques Barzun at Columbia University, a rare bird among historians then, who, as a card-carrying cultural historian, became a model to us all whether we did study with him or not (I did not).”  

He liked Barzun’s connections between politics and culture in his work: while the cultural historian made an effort to relate the Romantics to democratic thinking, Gay tried to prove that the *philosophes* were not bloodless theorists, but imaginative campaigners. Similarly, in his synthesis of the Enlightenment Gay continued to look for a defining style, not a set of ideas; he approached the *philosophes* as “a family of intellectuals united by a single style of thinking”.

Contrary to many older émigré intellectuals, his fluency in English motivated him to stir the cultural-historical imagination of his American public. While it was often associated with National Socialist mythmaking in Germany, in an American context his cultural approach became a strong statement against anti-intellectualism. In this sense, Gay’s cultural conservatism, which reflected an idea of human nature, also molded his progressive stance.

Contrary to many American scholars, however, Gay continued to be more cautious to avoid metaphysical speculation in his cultural constructions, explaining and legitimizing their function. His cultural approach, therefore, was the particular product of his position between two cultures. His revelation of the battle inside western intellectuals’ self-perception is in some ways reminiscent of Lionel Trilling’s *The Opposing Self* (1955), which claimed, inspired by Freud, that the West was in a spiritual crisis; western man confronted the problem of the “divided self”. But Trilling seemed to place the conflict of western culture more exclusively on the level of psychology, while he perceived a present need for “redemption” as the result of a hurried process of democratization.  

Impressed by the example of German intellectuals’ isolation from reality, Gay continued to advocate a democratic western culture in a historical context. He continued to ponder the perils of cultural synthesis, which

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had driven him to embrace social history in the first place; cultural synthesis was often produced by a wish to dissolve all ambivalence: “The first only tears apart, the second, distressed by disharmony, performs analysis for the sake of synthesis.” 587 For this reason, there were not many other German-American émigré historians who employed a cultural approach in their writings; exceptions were George Mosse’s and Fritz Stern’s examinations of National Socialist myth.

Gay increasingly began to use psychoanalysis to strengthen the ties between his cultural construction of the Enlightenment and the historical context. In the early 1950s Sigmund Freud was essential in sustaining his belief in the liberal principles of his German-Jewish upbringing and American culture. In Denver already, he had often chosen a psychological approach in his student papers about Plato and Spanish fascism. In his memoirs My German Question, he recalled how he, “puffed up with anthropological wisdom recently acquired at Columbia”, lectured his father on the vulgarity of atheism and to understand the social function of religion. His discovery of Freud, stimulated by Marcuse and Neumann, around the same time “promptly restored my unbeliever’s equilibrium by his teaching and his example”. 588 His first interest in psychoanalysis provided his father’s “village anti-religion” with a more intellectual basis. It were again Neumann and Marcuse, who played an essential role here. Around 1950, Neumann and his wife Inge began to read Freud with their closest friend Marcuse, and to reflect about modern history from a Freudian perspective: “This was to change my life.” According to Gay, no one, “not even in sociology or psychology, was following this psychoanalytic path”. 589 Although he never discussed Freud with Neumann, he did so with a fellow graduate student, “more consistently than my colleagues”. He did translate Neumann’s lecture “Anxiety and Politics”, the political scientist’s only publication about the role of psychology, into English: “To me, at least then, the happy collaboration of Freud and Marx seemed the most desirable way of dealing with the human condition.” 590 In his Bernstein biography, Gay had already referred to the socialist writer Ignazio Silone’s School for Dictators (1938), which claims that socialists underestimated the Nazis and were unprepared to understand the efficacy of Nazi

588 Gay, My German Question, 49.
590 Idem., 122.
propaganda, because their doctrine was defined by Marx and Engels in the nineteenth century, since when it had not made any great advance. Marx, therefore, could not anticipate the discovery of modern psychology.\textsuperscript{591}

Freud’s psychoanalysis offered scientific insights that promised to advance the construction of moral historical narratives without much of his parents’ rigid liberalism or the “naive” optimism that characterized American pragmatism. Freud increased Gay’s understanding that true secularism was no denial of man’s irrationality, but an attempt to control it: it “demonstrated that it was more than possible, it was necessary, to be rational about irrationality. This demonstration was Freud’s most revolutionary act”.\textsuperscript{592} The most important insight of psychoanalysis was that wish, emotion, and fantasy were as important as action in man’s experience. Psychoanalysis, therefore, assisted Gay’s efforts to make a distinction between “western” ideas and ideology, because it offered, next to social history, a further way of examining the effectivity of intellectuals’ thinking in the historical context. In his lecture “On the Prospects of Social Democracy”, written in the early 1950s, Gay argued that only psychology could distinguish between “effective” and “less effective” ideas: “In a way, the idea of human nature defines differences between ideas best—not only the ideas itself.”\textsuperscript{593} Like Neumann at the end of his life, Gay thus came to see psychoanalysis as a logical extension of social history. The historian observed a “slow evolution”\textsuperscript{594} of his “social history of ideas” from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies and his use of psychoanalysis; both were attempts to break out of “the intellectual historian’s self-constructed prison” that anchored ideas to the social and mental world: “A critic who like Cassirer relies on biography cannot completely ignore Freud and the discipline he founded”.\textsuperscript{595}

Over the years, he grew increasingly confident that an interaction between the historical and psychological disciplines was the way forward in the historical discipline. He maintained that the next “assignment of Intellectual History” was a “combination of the social history of ideas with the psychological history of ideas to research for that ultimate ideal of historical inquiry: cultural history,

\textsuperscript{591} Gay, \textit{The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism}, 219.
\textsuperscript{593} Gay, “Lecture: ‘On the Prospects of Social Democracy’”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 11.
\textsuperscript{594} Gay, \textit{Freud for Historians}, xiii.
Echoing the ambitions of the French *Annales* School, his interdisciplinary approach reinforced the suggestion that the past could indeed be captured. In 1976, this belief would even culminate in his training to become a professional psychoanalyst.

**Psychoanalysis and Enlightenment**

Gay’s friendship with the American historian Richard Hofstadter molded his dealings with psychoanalysis in many ways: “Indeed, in the long run, in part because I cherished him, his impact on me was more lasting than Neumann’s. Dick Hofstadter was drenched in Freud.” This statement is questionable, given the crucial role that Neumann played in acquainting Gay with European intellectual traditions that infused his work on German history and the Enlightenment. We have earlier noticed that he tended to downplay his supervisor’s impact, which he also did in the case of Marcuse. In his contribution to Marcuse’s *Festschrift*, “The Social History of Ideas. Ernst Cassirer and After”, he positioned himself opposite the philosopher, acknowledging his impact on his thinking more implicitly. During the Cold War, he was not keen on publicly associating with these Marxists. Besides, his repudiation of Adorno diminished his eagerness to advocate the contributions of the Frankfurt School. Similar to his decision to use the Hegel-specialist Sabine, instead of Marcuse, in his courses, and his later references to the impact of Anglo-Saxon philosophers on his thinking, he propagated a “westernization” of German traditions, which served to stimulate the creation of a transatlantic culture but sometimes tended to obscure its German roots.

In the context of Gay’s own research of irrationality with its use of controversial German traditions, references to Hofstadter’s liberal style served to point out his own political affiliations. Moreover, being one of the first American historians to process psychoanalytical insights into his work, Hofstadter did offer significant illustrations from historical practice:

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599 This is elaborated on in Chapter IV.
“Surely, other historians before him had already glimpsed the irrational dimensions of politics. But his particular definition of politics as a curious, intriguing mixture of the rational pursuit of self-interest and the less well-understood non-rational pursuit of self-interest of other, often unconscious aims showed me the way just how one might master just one discipline and animate it with ideas drawn from another.”

Hofstadter’s notion of political culture, which “may have been an American concept”, borrowed lavishly from Freud. Fuelled by Cassirer, Freud and Hofstadter, Gay extended the meaning of politics through his conviction that man’s actions can be political—even when he doesn’t vote or even like politics. Freud, the "scientific heir of Verstehen", provided tools to interpret a variety of cultural phenomena. Gay would later state that Freud had taught him much: new, more instructive reading of diaries and dreams, letters and paintings, novels and medical texts. After Hofstadter’s death in 1970, Gay asked his widow Beatrice if she could find unpublished notes on psychoanalysis and history that would allow him “to continue his work.”

Gay’s adoption of psychoanalysis was frequently frowned upon. Many of his colleagues felt alienated from Freud’s perception of universal human traits, because it seemed to deny historical complexity. But according to Gay, “the findings of psychoanalysis speak directly to the historian’s passion for complexity.” In a postwar scholarly climate shaped by intellectuals’ search for the qualities of American culture that united Americans, Gay’s use of Freud’s psychoanalysis kindled the return of conflict in history. “This is how people are: buffeted by conflicts, ambivalent in their emotions, intent on reducing tensions by defensive stratagems, and for the most part dimly, or perhaps not at all, aware why they feel and act as they do.” Psychoanalysis was “no strict theoretical framework to bind history ideologically, but an informed style of inquiry, supplying answers no one had thought available before or—even more important—suggesting questions no one had thought to

600 Gay, “History, Biography, and Psychoanalysis”, 94.
603 Gay, Freud for Historians, xiv.
604 “Letter to Beatrice Hofstadter”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.
605 Gay, Freud for Historians, 70.
606 Idem., 75.
ask”. His writings never reflected a rigid application of psychoanalysis, but rather inspired his questions and points of focus in his research.

In his synthesis of the Enlightenment, psychoanalysis supplied Gay with the tools to make connections between individual experiences and society. It structured his history of mentality, shaping his belief in the continuity of man’s experience: he attributes “motives, studies passions, analyzes irrationality, and constructs his work on the tacit conviction that human beings display certain stable and discernable traits, certain predictable, or at least discoverable, modes of coping with their experience”. In his article “Psychoanalysis in History” (1988), he states that Freud facilitated a move from biography to history in three different ways. In the first place, psychoanalysis was able to distinguish between “mutual identifications” and “common ego ideals” (perceptions of the ideal self) that transform individuals into a community: “Members of such groups merely think and act as though they were merely part of a larger whole.” In Voltaire’s Politics, he had already claimed that the philosophes were united in a “general temper—anticlerical, empirical, humanitarian”, rather than in a program. The second move from the individual to the collective came, according to Gay, through the idea of human nature: “Human beings display certain stable and discernable traits, certain predictable, or at least discoverable, modes of coping with their experience.” The idea of human nature was shared by Cassirer, who agreed with anthropologists that all freedom of action is checked by the recognition of certain objective, inner limitations of the human mind: “Cassirer’s method suggests, although it does not require, an approach to history and philosophy which places heavy stress on the study of the nature of man. Kant was deeply interested in the problems of philosophical anthropology.” While psychology uncovered the variety of unconscious drives and wishes, hopes and dreams, anthropology viewed the primitive and the modern mind as basically the same. Contrary

607 Idem., 32.
609 Freud first outlined this road in his study Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921).
611 Gay, Voltaire’s Politics, 165.
612 Gay, Freud for Historians, 1.
613 Gay, “Introduction”, The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau, 23. It should be added that Cassirer was not smuggling in ideology through an idea of the unmovable human nature. Instead, he believed that the problem of man’s nature cannot be solved. Again, the essence of man’s nature can only be approached by probing its historical function.
to Cassirer’s more anthropological understanding of human nature, Freud’s assumption of variety and human nature “helped to guarantee the reliability of historical assertions, because it makes the past to a degree as the present”.  

In this sense, psychoanalysis strengthened the relevance of the past for the present.

Finally, the “the safest and widest of the bridges” between the individual and the collective is the examination of “experience”, which rests on the assumption that man is both an individual and a product of society. Gay would especially in the second volume of his synthesis, *The Science of Freedom*, explore the possibilities of psychoanalysis for historical writing. While *The Rise of Modern Paganism* dealt with the *philosophes*’ education, *The Science of Freedom* “may be read as the social history of the *philosophes*’ philosophy”.  

The *philosophes* were united in the first place by “a common experience”: “The experience of the eighteenth century was the recovery of nerve.”  

Their unifying experience consisted of their education in the classics, chiefly the Latin and Hellenistic writings from Cicero and Lucretius to Marcus Aurelius. Cassirer and Panofsky fuelled Gay’s insights about the transmission of the classical heritage through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. Their crisis of identity, which was caused by their position between the religious Middle, formed the catalyst of this search. This made them “outsiders” and “insiders” of their own time. Gay puts it, as usual, dialectically: “The dialectical interplay of their appeal to antiquity, their tension with Christianity, and their pursuit of modernity.” The *philosophes*’ hope was grounded in their use of social sciences like psychology and anthropology, which distinguished them from classical philosophers, “establishing the superiority of their own, second age of criticism over the first, and thus keep their respect for their ancestors within proper bounds”. For the first time in history, Gay declares, “confidence was the companion of realism rather than a symptom of the utopian

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615 Gay claims: “[the book] analyzes their environment—the economic and cultural changes that made the philosophy of the Enlightenment relevant and in fact inevitable, the position of writers and artists, which gave substance to the philosophers demands and to their expectations—and to the philosophers’ program, their view of progress, science, art, society, and politics.” *The Science of Freedom*, ix.
618 Idem., 59.
619 Idem., 8.
imagination.” This attitude, shaped by their own perception that they were in fact representing a new era, stimulated their “desire for political action”.

So at a time when many scholars lost their belief in the significance of historical explanations of the present, Gay enhanced their credibility using insights of German Geistesgeschichte and Freud that reflected a more subtle balance between the universal and particular than American positivism; he employed social history and psychoanalysis to anchor his cultural constructions in the historical context. While the early Cold War induced many American intellectuals to turn inwards, Gay sought to strengthen a western identity within critical and invigorating transatlantic dynamics. His use of psychology invited his American public to recognize itself, while his emphasis on the particular in European history, enforced by an eye for the philosophes’ weaknesses, avoided parallels suggesting that American history would eventually culminate in a similar war and ideology. Yet, in the 1960s students and colleagues increasingly began to question Gay’s efforts to make American culture part of western culture. The dreaded position of the isolated intellectual, who played such a controversial role in German history, seemed to become more real than it had ever before.

621 Idem., 3. In his first chapter, “The Recovery of Nerve”, Gay’s elaboration on the Enlightenment’s confidence was the product of “the natural sciences, medicine, manners, humanitarian sentiment, slow crumbling of traditional social hierarchies, and revolutionary changes in the production of food, the organization of industry, the pattern of population—all pointing in the same direction.” *The Science of Freedom*, 8.
Chapter IV:

Reinventing Weimar in the sixties

Introduction:

At the end of the 1960s, Gay himself was still able to detect the relevance of the Enlightenment for postwar western culture, but others had their doubts. In 1968 the Enlightenment and American liberal identity became subjects of heated controversy. Waves of activism flooded one American university after another, swallowing the liberal principles of the 1950s and replacing them with new ones. Striving for national unity faded in the face of a new crisis. While the Second World War had united Americans, issues like the controversial war in Vietnam and the democratization of universities divided them. The Enlightenment historian Charles Gillespie wrote to Gay: “We are living amid events in which it takes a certain courage to write about the Enlightenment.”

As part of a small elite of mostly Jewish-American intellectuals, Gay had stood up against the excessive optimism and pessimism about American national identity a decade earlier. But the historian did not join the New Left. The “new” outsiders of the 1960s – blacks, women, gays and Third World revolutionaries – redefined the meaning of the Left and disconnected it from the liberal West. The new insider, now a full professor, continued to work patiently on the history of western culture. Gay counted respectable historians like Jacques Barzun, Peter Novick, Fritz Stern, Robert Webb and Orest Ranum among his colleagues at Columbia. Eventually, his venerable position permitted him to look confidently over Columbia’s gate to other universities. In 1964, Barzun appealed to “our bi-centennial friendship” to convince him to refuse tempting offers for prestigious professorships: “We need you. You do not need us, but you may consider (I hope you will) that ease and affection and autonomy are not always replaceable at will or in short time.” And he did stay—only to leave in 1969, after what his colleague Fritz Stern called the “worst crisis in a hundred years.”

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623 “Letter of Charles Gillespie to Gay”, undated, Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1; Unprocessed.
624 “Letter of Jacques Barzun to Gay”, 27 February 1964; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1; Unprocessed.
isolation mounted during the attacks on his western world. For him, the United States continued to represent a safe haven from Nazi threat, while students defended their own concept of freedom in their march against traditional institutions, like the “imperialist” government and the “authoritarian” university. For the first time since his escape from Nazi-Germany, Gay heard a radical mass movement shouting outside the windows of his office at Fayerweather Hall.

The clash between Gay and the students reflected their different interpretations of Weimar’s “lessons” for postwar western culture. Initially, the interest in Weimar’s intellectuals was mostly limited to a group of American intellectuals in New York, while the public debate about Nazi-Germany was often silenced by the battle against communism. But the significance of German history and culture for the United States quickly changed after the war. In the 1960s, the publication of William Shirer’s bestseller *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (1960) was the first attempt at a comprehensive synthesis of the events of the Nazi period. In *The American Political Science Review*, William Ebenstein noted that “the unexpected phenomenal success of William Shirer’s *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* a decade and a half after World War II showed that the interest of the reading public in German Nazism was stronger than the professional historians and political scientists had assumed”. Shirer effectively called the German past to the American scene. His book provocatively claimed that German culture developed “logically” from Luther to Hitler. While many historians were critical, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* received a mass audience in Europe and the United States, where it won the National Book Award. In 1960, other events that raised attention for German history were the capture of Adolf Eichmann and the rise of the German extreme right. Eventually, German crimes came to be known among the American public to an extent neither ever examined nor imagined.

But also another, rather different “Weimar” came into view at the end of the decade. The magazine *Encounter* illustrated this new perception on the republic: “We normally take it for granted

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627 Ebenstein, “Review: George Mosse’s The Crisis of German Ideology”, 471.
628 Rosenfeld, ”The Reception of William L. Shirer’s The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich in the United States and West Germany”, 111.
that the culture which developed in Germany and central Europe after the First World War was, in spite of its brilliant achievements and the many masterpieces it left us, a defeated culture.”629 A new engagement with Weimar's intellectual and cultural traditions evolved.630 The republic was no longer exclusively associated with ideological disaster that frequently condoned American feelings of superiority. The ambivalent “myth of Weimar”, both a positive and negative model, had now come into full being.

The enthusiasm that rebel students for Weimar’s revolutionary intellectual and cultural traditions felt, dramatized this duality of the republic’s legacy; their call for revolution set the memory of Weimar on fire. In 1969, the American magazine The New Republic signaled this new position in a review of Gay's book about the republic's cultural history:

“Weimar entered the American intellectual consciousness only very late—not, in fact, well after its demise. […] Weimar has left its undeniable imprint on the United States. There is now a new interest in Weimar, because of many parallels with politics in the United States in the middle sixties. Both are countries that cried out political change and were denied it. […] And, again, as in Weimar, their effects have been largely balked by the society at large, their energies often finding release in cynicism, despair, decadence, or empty radicalism.”631

A new generation did not adopt Gay's liberal Weimar “lessons”, but became inspired by the work of émigré intellectuals such as Adorno and Horkheimer, who shared their critical stance towards the United States. Émigré thought was mainly called upon to chide, instead of bolster, American culture. Carl Schorske observed a generation gap between “Cold War Liberals” and protesting students among American intellectuals originating in their different interpretations of the significance of “Weimar” for the American present: “Thus the differing interpretations of Weimar society reflect America’s internal conflict over its own purposes and directions. Yet all interpretations agree that Weimar is somehow

important for America’s understanding of itself.” Schorske discerned the older generation to draw parallels between the students and the Nazis’ erosion of the republic through the university system, while the younger interpreters pointed to “the repression of opponents of the military-industrial complex in the name of law and order”. Like earlier American intellectuals in New York, many students felt that “Weimar” could offer them theoretical concepts and past experience to recast an “American” identity. The magazine Commentary pointed out that American intellectuals’ identification with Weimar’s “legacy” sometimes went pretty far:

“American intellectuals, in their current agony, have constructed a virtual Doppelgänger out of the turbulent life and premature death of the Weimar Republic. In its most recent incarnation, the ‘Weimar analogy’ offers left-wing American intellectuals a historical portrait of their counterparts in pre-war Germany—an articulate circle of journalists and creative writers who stubbornly clung to their roles as critics of a beleaguered democratic government.”

Schorske apparently considered Gay to be part of the first group of “Cold War Liberals”: “Gay’s values are clearly those of the older generation of American liberals: appreciative of aesthetic culture but suspicious of the whole world of instinct with which it is connected.” He was not alone thinking that Gay’s notion of the “West” had lost its appeal.

This view resonated among students and faculty at Columbia, where the protests became especially loud. Gay was not comfortable with tendencies in modern European history at Columbia. In 1969, he wrote to Hofstadter that “Columbia history in modern Europe is a scandal and nothing less”. The historian joined the debate about Weimar’s lessons for postwar-America in his own

635 Schorske, “Weimar and the Intellectuals I”.
636 “Letter to Richard Hofstadter”, 8 March 1969; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2; Unprocessed.
reconstruction of the period, *Weimar Culture: the Outsider as Insider* (1968). In this chapter, it is argued that this book can be interpreted as a counter-narrative to the revolutionary symbol it had become in the 1960s. *Weimar Culture* responded to his colleagues’ and students’ undermining of three pillars of Gay’s worldview: his ideas of western culture, focus on stability, and the contemporary relevance of historical scholarship. The new German-American intellectual ties that were formed in the course of the 1960s confronted him more with the limitations of transatlantic exchange than ever before. The uproar of the sixties challenged his flexibility to adapt to the radically different situation at hand—definitely qualities that he had always demanded from the intellectuals he wrote about. Tempting as it may have been to withdraw into his own interpretation of German history, this was not an option for him.

**Setting the Stage**

Protesting students and colleagues frequently campaigned for causes like freedom and democracy that Gay himself had taken up since the beginning of his career. 1950s McCarthyism had in some ways allowed him to comfortably stay in the leftist camp. Generally, criticism of right-wing populism at home and leftist extremism abroad were easy to combine. Only Democratic candidates such as Hubert Humphrey, who ran for president in 1952 and 1960, mildly tested his loyalty to the party. Gay, an admirer of the art of campaigning, was particularly critical of the candidate’s talent for public speaking: “Now you may say, speeches don’t matter, but they do, because there are a great many choices that people have when they give speeches.” The speeches of John F. Kennedy were undoubtedly more effective than Humphrey’s: “The intervention of people like McCarthy and then later Kennedy seemed to me to make it possible to stay within the Democratic party.” From the mid-sixties on he had grown increasingly critical of the president’s involvement in Vietnam:

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“Kennedy was a charming nice fellow and all that. But there was one problem from the beginning: Vietnam. It was not a smart thing to do. Johnson, who is admired much less, did much more, like the first serious legislation on blacks.”\textsuperscript{639} He was a critical supporter of the powerful Kennedy clan; Robert Kennedy thanked Gay with a hand-written note for his help during his campaign for a seat in the senate.\textsuperscript{640} In 1968 Gay declared once again: “I am one of those very old-fashioned things, the regular Democrat.”\textsuperscript{641}

In general, the historian’s self-image of reasonable, left-winged intellectual remained largely intact in the 1960s, but others judged differently. Somehow, Gay landed in the “other” camp. His confrontation with left-wing populism and radicalism formed a completely new challenge. His belief in values such as stability, the power of consistency and loyalty lost more and more ground. “We historians defended ourselves from the Right and the Left.”\textsuperscript{642} he noted. In general, “Columbia’s History Department was not a demonstrating place in the 1950s. I never demonstrated, it was not my style. I was not a coward, because I had written letters to The New York Times. I was quite willing to put myself on the line.”\textsuperscript{643} But the center did not hold this time. The first protests occurred in March 1965 at the University of Michigan in the form of a “teach-in”, a joint forum of faculty and students. A week later revolt had reached the University of California-Berkeley and soon spread out over many other American and European universities. On December sixth, 1966, just after the start of the Berkeley uproar, Gay and Richard Hofstadter sent a letter to the editor of the Columbia Spectator that contradicted the students’ call for more academic freedom:

“In your editorial of December 2 you portray the current situation at Berkeley as a problem of academic freedom for students. You say that the University officials ‘show dangerous signs of refusing to acknowledge the simple truth that freedom to protest and to demonstrate is essential to the interchange of ideas which is the basic role of any university.’ The undersigned, having each spent about two weeks at Berkeley during the present and the

\textsuperscript{639} Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
\textsuperscript{640} “Letter of Robert Kennedy to Gay”, 3 February 1965, Peter Gay Papers; Box 2; Unprocessed. Gay had been a member of Kennedy’s Education Committee.
\textsuperscript{641} Gay, “A Disenchanted Democrat Defends the System”, 4.
\textsuperscript{642} Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
\textsuperscript{643} Ibidem.
previous regular term, would like to testify that in our judgment the basic academic freedoms of students are observed as fully at Berkeley as they are at any American campus we know of—as fully, for example, as at Columbia—and that they are amply exercised by the Berkeley students.644

Gay and Hofstadter perceived that not academic freedom, but other issues were at stake. In their letter, they emphasized that the unrest at Berkeley signaled that “the nature of the university community and the extent of university authority” should be subject to debate. They thought that this dilemma had a more practical character: “It is the question whether non-students, who cannot be subject to any university discipline, shall be at liberty to enjoy the rights and privileges of students in on-campus activities.” In vain, the two historians tried to lure students away from ideological slogans to a more sober reality.

Gay’s unease about the students’ attack of the academic community went straight to the heart of his own views on the role of the university. His political commitment had practically always been organized in the context of the rational community of academia. After all, he thought that not revolution but education should be a catalyst for social change. At the end of the 1960s, the student movement disturbed the safe, sensible community that he thought he had found. Especially at his own university, the situation threatened to run out of control. The confrontation between students and police catapulted Columbia into the center of the protests, which captured international attention for weeks. The aggressive conduct of the police radicalized many students and much of the faculty. In a letter to Gay in 1967, George Mosse formulated their shared anxiety about the turmoil at their universities: “It is pretty tense and no one really knows about the future.”645 Another colleague in Madison expressed his worries about the more serious situation at Columbia: “We have had our fun at Madison too—a few dozen bloodied heads, a few attempts to burn down Bascom Hall, a fire bomb hurled into the Dean’s office—little things like that. But our people are mere dilettantes compared with yours.”646

645 “Letter of George Mosse to Gay”, 24 November 1967; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2; Unprocessed.
646 “Letter of Donald Greene to Gay”, 6 July 1968; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2; Unprocessed.
During this crisis, Gay failed to live up to his own ideal of the detached observer, which he himself was ready to admit: “I have contributed to the widespread loss of civility.” While McCarthyism had not implicated his own position as defender of rationality and freedom, the dissent of the 1960s laid bare the irrationality of most who were involved. Notwithstanding his rising panic, Gay fought back—as a scholar that is. He drew up a 20-page evaluation of the situation headed “Open Letter to My Colleagues” that hardly concealed its apprehensive undertone. Written when current events were still pressing, this letter reflected his first reaction to Columbia’s turbulence, including an attempt to justify his own behavior: he and his colleagues had encountered many difficulties on the road to reason: “Little sleep, poor food, exhausting meetings, and, worst of all, the interminable pressure to make decisions.” “Open Letter to My Colleagues” reflected Gay’s “recovery of nerve”, in which he tried to take over the initiative in order to restore rationality. This meant, according to Gay, in the first place a proper historical account of recent events. Police actions had turned students and much of the faculty “into men without memories”, who turned their anger into a radical stance against authority: “Students of police brutality, and historians with good memories recalling strikes in 1937 or student demonstrations in Paris or street battles in the Weimar Republic, were for the most part relieved that things had not been worse.” He took it upon himself to provide the necessary historical details to encourage his colleagues’ overview of the situation: “We can only know what to do by knowing what we did—those who misrepresent the past betray the future.”

He began to write his letter some time after the beginning of the protests: “On Tuesday morning, April 23—it all seems very long ago—the Columbia Spectator announced that six Columbia students, one from the graduate faculty, had been put on probation for violating a Presidential order, promulgated last September, prohibiting indoor demonstrations in March, contrary to this order, the Students for a Democratic Society and some of their allies had held a meeting in Low Memorial Library, the administrative heart of Columbia’s participation in the Institute for Defense Analysis.” After the announcement, the SDS organized a rally to protest against the suspensions and the political suppression of the left, and its “racist” policies. David B. Truman, the vice-president and provost of Columbia University, “who was

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at all times closely associated with President Kirk”, offered to meet with the demonstrators, an offer they rejected:

“Instead, they marched to the site of the proposed gymnasium, tore down a fence, and then, joined by various negro organizations, moved to Hamilton Hall, the center of Columbia College, went inside the building in renewed and deliberate violation of the ordinance against indoor demonstrations, and then decided to take a hostage to enforce their various demands. They barricaded the building and kept Harry S. Coleman, the acting dean of Colombia College, virtual prisoner until late Wednesday afternoon. Early on Wednesday morning, the negro college students took command; ‘it was important’, as many on campus said in the new debased lingo of the time, ‘for the blacks to do their own thing.’ What they did was to expel the white demonstrators, including the president of the Columbia SDS Mark Rudd, from Hamilton Hall. A faculty member of sociology department told the SDS after their expulsion to go and get a building of their own.”

What happened then remained unclear: “The full history of these events will not be written for a long time, but there are reliable reports that a faculty member of the Sociology Building told the SDS after their expulsion to go and get a building on their own. The remark has become part of the campus legend of sit-ins; only patient research will deny or confirm it.” The SDS moved on Low Library and seized president Kirk's office. During a trying week, there were a lot of meetings between the faculty of the History Department and the graduate students. The students demanded a more egalitarian university: “They didn’t want to be graded anymore.” But the historians refused to give in “to the students and to the police”. It was terrifying to see the police “marching through dormitories and halls with their sticks out”, but “some students were pleased to be under attack”. After the police came “things stopped exploding”.

**Appropriate Activism**

In his “Open Letter”, Gay criticized three aspects of the student movement: its radicalism, its anti-western stance and a far-reaching politization of scholarship. The first of these issues exposed the

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649 Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
widening generation gap of the 1960s. The demographic revolution at universities brought about by the baby boom and the G.I. Bill, which granted ex-soldiers free access to higher education, had been a catalyst for further democratic change. The elite began to be concerned about the impersonalization of educational culture. Stern noticed that the “estrangement between teachers and students may have grown, not diminished, under the conditions of the newly politicized university”\textsuperscript{650}. The generation gap became even more pronounced by the unprecedented alignments of scholars such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to politics. Being a Europeanist, Gay was a less likely governmental advisor than Schlesinger, but at several times he sought his own connections to American and German politics, as well. Still, he disliked Schlesinger’s strong ties to power: “He was known of being crazy about the Kennedys.” Nor did he like that the historian “was very taken by Reinhold Niebuhr, it didn’t seem necessary.”\textsuperscript{651} While Schlesinger’s “vital center” echoed some tendencies in his own thinking, the atheist himself would never have promoted a theologian.

Most protesting students and intellectuals did not dispute the very existence of a leading elite of intellectuals. The American student movement distinguished itself from its German counterpart through a belief that students and intellectuals, instead of the labor movement, should be the driving force of social transformation. While German students protested an intellectual elite that was traditionally strongly connected to the Kulturnation, the memory of McCarthy’s attack on the American intelligentsia propelled intellectualism as the driving force of history in the United States.\textsuperscript{652} The notorious “Letter to the New Left” (1960), written by Gay’s former colleague at Columbia, the sociologist C. Wright Mills, affirmed intellectuals' leading role and popularized the term “New Left”. Therefore, the disagreement between Gay and the New Left rather involved the specific role of the elite. The historian himself made a clear distinction between authority and authoritarianism: the former was essential in the formation and preservation of a stable community. His lifelong suspicion of instability and the irrationality of mass movements demanded a self-assured, guiding elite: “What we need now is a restoration of reason and of authority–both belong together.”\textsuperscript{653} While he thought that

\textsuperscript{650} Stern, “Reflections on the International Student Movement”, 108.
\textsuperscript{651} Interview with the author, 23 April 2009.
\textsuperscript{652} Klimke, \textit{The Other Alliance}, 11.
\textsuperscript{653} Gay, “Open Letter to My Colleagues”.
the students were too radical in their demands, Columbia's administration was far too soft: “They were liberals suffering the fate of liberals in crisis: they tried to avoid violence and preserve the law, and pleased no one.” This “softness” characterized the liberal who was too shy to act out his authority; many “betrayed” their own position in their support to the student protests: “What radicalized the students most definitely, even more than the war in Vietnam or the police or our campus, was the support they got from some of the faculty.” Too many academics had lost their nerves and put the “experience of youth itself” on a pedestal instead. They tried “to be like them and deprived them of the incentive to grow to become like us—or better”. Gay regretted the remark of his colleague, the historian Walter Metzger, who dismissively referred to academic “grey beards”: “It has been the graybeards and the men whose names are in the card catalogues that have made this university what it is at its best, and what he is at his best.” Not restrained “grey beards” but rowdy youth threatened society: “Children, as everyone knows, want to violate limits and yet be forgiven; they want to defy all authority and yet be told that they are loveable; they cannot postpone … but want everything now.”654 He was deeply upset by students' violation of the office of his colleague Orest Ranum, like him a “contra-revolutionary” professor in European history. He called upon his colleagues to retrieve their position as a guiding elite: “We must once again act our age, to abed the timidities of liberal fathers and reassemble our responsibilities.”

It was above all the revolution’s radicalism that disregarded careful political strategy, which terrified Gay. The problem of the democratic Left, as he already formulated it in his Bernstein biography, was defined by the tension between “principles and power” that involved “discussion, vote-getting and parliamentarism–rather than terror, violence, revolution”.655 He detected the students’ radicalism most of all in their language. He referred to George Orwell’s explanation that words do actually show a connection to man’s deeds: “The debasement of language leads to debasement of thinking–this is the road to totalitarianism.” During the protests, one of his colleagues in the French department referred eloquently to Montesquieu's statement that “there is no thought without action.”656

654 Ibidem.
655 Gay, The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism, ix.
656 Gay, “Open Letter to My Colleagues”.
Again, he set out to emphasize that ideas can have dangerous consequences. In 1968, he echoed Bernstein's dilemma when he summoned faculty to distinguish between the “substance of the issues” and the “methods of the demonstrators” to assess the price “we would have to pay for changes—even desirable changes—effected with such tactics”. He observed the debasement of language during Columbia’s crisis: “Clichés, thick as cigarette smoke over a crowded cocktail party, where words like ‘dialogue’ (or, even better, “meaningful dialogue”) ‘confrontation’, or ‘channels of communication’, substituted for real thought.” He thought that many of his colleagues were as blind to the connection between ideas and political reality as the students. The crisis “brings out the amateur Machiavelli, the man who is clever without being really intelligent; what was dismaying that Columbia had so many Machiavelli’s with tenure, offsetting the efforts of those who wanted peace for Columbia rather than prominence for themselves”. In the heat of crisis, these “amateurs” tried to take the part of politicians and leaders of the revolution. According to Gay, they were most of all lost academics.

Gay’s eye for the strategic side of the situation framed his views on the issue of racism, which stirred public indignation at Columbia. The issue that set the place on fire in the first place was the administration’s objective to build a gym in Morningside Park. Instead of joining the outburst of anger about the “racist” administration, Gay seemed to relativize it in moving his analysis of the administrators’ failure to the level of strategy: the gym “became a symbol of Columbia’s racism over the last few years—therefore it should be abandoned much earlier”. Now the gym had become a racist symbol of the administrators’ bad politics. Gay, however, hesitated to speculate about the administration’s intentions; a focus on political practice formed in his eyes the only rational approach, especially under the present chaotic circumstances. Still, it is understandable that his refusal to participate in this, what he called “ballyhoo”, made him vulnerable to accusations of lacking real commitment to the interests of the community in Harlem. Mistrustful of symbolic speech, he refused to play along with the drama at Columbia. In spite of his own emotional reactions, he did not accept that he was already participating.

658 Ibidem.
Weimar and the West

The conflicts between Gay and the student movement were deepened by their disparate interpretations of Weimar’s lessons for postwar western culture. Parallels between the Vietnam War and the Holocaust were frequently drawn at the end of the decade.\(^{659}\) It shocked Gay that students now used the term “fascist” in relation to himself. In a lecture in 1968 he told his audience that “faculty members opposed to the student occupation of the university were called ‘right-wingers’, ‘reactionary’—terms applied, among many others, to me, though I think of myself as a consistent left-winger on international, national, and Columbia issues”.\(^{660}\) In his “Open Letter to My Colleagues”, he referred to his own experiences in Nazi Germany: “I spent five years of my life in a fascist country and know something about fascism.” Among his colleagues, he did observe a few “calm voices”, “ready to learn from history”: “Ernest Nagel talking of means and needs, Lionel Trilling seeking to dissociate the ’30s from the events of the moment”. The voice of reason, according to Gay, was to extricate American society from comparisons with the revolutionary situation of the 1930s.

The students, however, had developed their own views on German history and culture. Their exposure to German intellectual and cultural traditions has even been referred to as the “Germanizing” of American youth.\(^{661}\) This impact can be traced back to the lack of a tradition of leftist American radicalism. Like many American scholars of the 1950s, students of the 1960s were often drawn to German theory that provided theoretical underpinnings of their criticism of American culture. Other inspiration came from the many cultural and academic exchange programs between American and German universities that were established in the postwar-years.\(^{662}\) Exchange students acted as mediators between the American student movement and the strongly theoretical character of its German counterpart.

661 Klimke, The Other Alliance, 80-1.
662 Ibidem.
Naturally, émigré intellectuals played a substantial role making students familiar with Weimar's revolutionary theoretical traditions. As a specialist on eighteenth and nineteenth political movements in European history, who wrote his dissertation on a German socialist, Gay himself had ironically first contributed to Columbia students' knowledge about revolutionary Weimar in seminars about “Europe in the age of the revolutions” and “European Intellectual History”. He had become a mediator between much revolutionary thought of first-generation émigrés and students’ radicalism. This first generation laid the foundations of its thought before the collapse of the republic that would later inspire Gay’s attachment to stability and moderation. The critical theory of the Frankfurt School shaped students’ understanding of the concept of human alienation, modern society and the early writings of Marx. Herbert Marcuse was actively promoting the students’ cause. Until 1965 he taught political theory at Brandeis University and then at the University of California in San Diego until his retirement. The radically changed character of German-American intellectual exchange couldn’t be more aptly illustrated than by Marcuse’s commitment to the New Left, who had encouraged Gay’s partial embrace of the German tradition of Geistesgeschichte in the 1940s. Marcuse’s radical critique of capitalism was taken up by students during the Cold War. Marcuse’s Eros and Civilization (1955), One-Dimensional Man (1964), and Repressive Tolerance (1965) were key texts in the student movement. Along with the novelist and social critic Paul Goodman and the sociologist C. Wright Mills, as well as Hannah Arendt, Marcuse became the champion of participatory democracy that was so central to the civil rights movement. Besides Marcuse, Hans Morgenthau (1904-1980, University of Chicago) was one of the few émigré intellectuals to become an active figure in student protests. He joined marches, delivered speeches and radio broadcasts, while students called upon him for advice. The Americanist Howard Zinn sided with the students and attested to Morgenthau's inspiration. Another leader of the protests, C. Wright Mills, studied with Hans Gerth (1908-1978), a member of

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664 Greenberg, 250-2.
665 Idem., 99.
the Frankfurt School at the University of Madison-Wisconsin. This university was the first to publish the *Studies of the Left* in 1959.

Through their participation in these magazines and their direct support of student protests, émigré and American intellectuals forged transatlantic ties that renounced Gay’s own German-American perspective on western culture. On March 10th Fritz Stern read a statement that reflected Gay’s views as well. In “The University as a Sanctuary of Academic Freedom”, Stern criticized the behaviour of “militant students…[who] have discovered the fragility of free, liberal universities; in exploring that fragility, they are threatening to wreck the traditional purposes and values of Western universities”.666 According to Stern, students were experimenting with the vulnerable values that the last generation had had to fight for. This statement was signed by over 800 Columbia professors at a televised news conference at Columbia. So Gay was definitely not alone in his fight—albeit his motives for combat were often different from American scholars’. While his own painful and slow inclusion of parts of the German tradition of *Geistesgeschichte* broadened his understanding of western culture in the 1950s, the students’ embrace of the Third World did not recognize his earlier endeavor and vice versa. Although, or because, the students were in many respects influenced by the transatlantic exchange, an identification with Third World revolutionary aspirations frequently replaced a commitment to western culture. Stern agreed with Gay’s point of view: “Since 1945 the question of the relevance of European and German history for Americans has been blunted by the discovery of the so-called Third World in Africa and Asia which, as it were, negatively confirmed the historical and political kinship and symmetry of the Atlantic world.”667 For Stern and Gay, the Third World became a dreaded competitor for the hearts and souls of the next generation.

Gay attributed students’ attraction to the Third World to an identity problem: their shared victimhood, inflicted by western power, was a delusion. They failed to recognize that their criticism of the West was also formed by western traditions, which implied their refusal to take responsibility for its condition. They exchanged the western texture of their background for a “borrowed” identification with the Third World that invited estrangement rather than self-criticism. The student protests,
therefore, became a form of role-play that blurred their capacity for authentic self-expression. In the letter about the Berkeley protests that Gay and Hofstadter wrote together, they referred to the rioters as “a very small number of nihilists, who are vigorously committed to playing the game of ‘confrontation’, and who showed no sign of caring what happens to the University in the process”.668 The dynamics between the critical “outsider” and the responsible “insider” formed the core of Gay’s perception of the Enlightenment, and shaped his political commitment to the political center, while the students, according to the historian, more exclusively identified with victims and minorities.

The fresh relevance of “Weimar” in America was reflected by historians’ writings on the republic’s history. Mosse and Walter Laqueur, founders of the Journal for Contemporary History in 1966, dedicated one of the first issues of the journal to international comparisons between youth movements from the 1920s to the 1960s.669 In articles and books these historians made large contributions to the debate about Weimar’s contemporary relevance.670 In 1972, the present prominence of Weimar was epitomized by a meeting of historians and social scientists, organized by the English historian Geoffrey Barraclough, to discuss the historical validity of the abundant parallels between Weimar and the United States: “The reason we are here today is the alleged analogy between the Weimar crisis and current American discontents; it is because of the light which German experience between 1919 and 1933 may, or may not, throw on the situation of the United States today.”671 Also in American historical scholarship, the exact nature of Weimar’s significance remained open to debate.

Barraclough himself was not sure at all of the republic offering valuable lessons to the present. After all, there was still a lack of valid theoretical concepts of fascism or totalitarianism “as a general characteristic of modern industrialized society, as a product of technology and what is called ‘mass democracy’ of which Nazi Germany is held to have been the first example and to which (it is argued)

668 Gay and Hofstadter, “To the Editor”.
the United States is in danger of succumbing, unless we take action here and now”. Instead, historians such as Bracher, Holborn and Stern underlined that the Nazi revolution was a revolution sui generis, rising from tendencies in Bismarckian Germany. Besides, Barraclough referred to Stern’s statement that Germany’s encounter with imperial power before 1918 may be more relevant to America today than the more often invoked and more obvious lessons of Weimar. 672

At the end of the 1960s, the debate about Weimar’s relevance for the United States boiled down to the issue of intellectuals’ responsibility for the rise of National Socialism. As has been mentioned, Schorske observed a generation conflict in scholars’ approach to the research of Weimar’s history. A member of the older group of historians was, according to Schorske, Bruno Bettelheim with his article “The Anatomy of Academic Discontent Change” (1969). The views of this group were molded by the struggles of the liberal world against Hitler and Stalin; they “use a long established view of Weimar to explain a new America”. The younger ones, on the other hand, are attracted to “ideas generated in a new America to find a fresh understanding of Weimar’s Nazi and American students have much in common in their political behavior and in their determination to bring down the establishment”. 673 Examples of these younger scholars, whose historical images empowered New Left idealism, were Istvan Déak and Harold L. Poor. From the search for the answer to “Who killed Weimar?” historians shifted the focus to the more impersonal dilemma “Why did Weimar die?”. 674 Expounding the image of a doomed republic, they refuted the claim that the radical intelligentsia weakened the republic with their remorseless criticism, based on the conviction that the right could not alone have destroyed it. 675 While Weimar intellectuals have often been criticized for their failure to support the republic, historians such as Poor and Déak brought to the fore why it was impossible and even undesirable for the non-party radical democrats to suspend their criticism of the republic. In Weimar Germany’s Left-Wing Intellectuals (1969), Déak portrayed the Weimar writers who clustered around progressive journals like Die Weltbühne and Das Tagebuch as advocates of democratic, liberal,

672 Barraclough noted that the significance of the memory of the Weimar Republic for the United States was more intense and widespread in the years 1968-9, while the de-escalation of the wars in Vietnam and the treaty with China became much more important among the American public in the 1970s.
673 Schorske, “Weimar and the Intellectuals I”.
674 Ibidem.
675 Ibidem.
and humane values. Schorske sharply divided the leftist circle around the Weltbühne from the widespread sympathy with the romanticist yearning for community. Like many other historians, he also mobilized the past to support the radical present: “The democratic past of America is on the side of the radical against the neo-conservative present.” The unresponsiveness of American institutions to the call for change had led the students to grow less concerned with the “villains who made fascism than with the failures of Weimar liberal political practice”. The historian concluded that these left-wing intellectuals saw “more clearly than most the consequences of the republic's sheltering the forces of conservative reaction”.676 In a similar vein, Poor characterized the accusations of historians as “essentially conservative”677 arguments that betrayed disdain to all opposition to the status quo.

Since the 1950s Gay’s development of Geistesgeschichte was intended to encourage both self-criticism and self-esteem in his narratives of western culture. The New Left, however, decided that he had failed. To be sure, while he had been the first scholar to study the political and social aspects of Voltaire’s thought, his cultural approach became more apparent in his synthesis. Robert Darnton affirmed that his research was not “original”, because he did not look for evidence in archives to strengthen his thesis. Darnton told historians that “the social history of ideas must move out of its armchair phase and into the archives, tapping new sources and developing new methods”.678 While Gay perceived psychoanalysis as an extension of social history, Smith noted that it is more suitable to have called Gay’s “social history of ideas” a “cultural history of ideas”, because the now emerging social history of E.P. Thompson and the Annales used different interpretations.679 Indeed, Gay’s large grasp of the Enlightenment as international movement was grounded in an extensive bibliography rather than in a raiding of archives. Moving away from the postwar fashion of intellectual history, social historians researched the varied experiences of groups that earlier historical scholarship had overlooked or ignored. Although Gay had initially denounced too rigid a repudiation of communism, he was now confronted with scholars’ enthusiastic re-reading of Marxist writings. John Higham has noted that the delayed impact of the Weimar revival of Marxist and Hegelian Studies fuelled leftist

676 Ibidem.
677 Poor, Kurt Tucholsky and the Ordeal of Germany, 84.
678 Darnton, “In Search for The Enlightenment”, 132.
scholarship: “Marxism was the most elegant historically sensitive cross-cultural framework available.” Higham reminds us that this was no real introduction, because several of the consensus interpretations of American history, like Louis Hartz' *The Liberal Tradition in America*, were already built on class analysis.

Much inspiration for New Left scholarship came from a book that Gay particularly disliked, E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of The English Working Class* (1964): “Surely, no work in European history ever so profoundly influenced so many American historians.” The literature that sprang up around this book deemed intellectual history irrelevant and elitist. Gay, however, spurned the fresh focus on the “culture of the poor”:

“We are today engaged in a great debate in the historical profession over the nature and the meaning of culture. The old-fashioned history of ideas . . . liked to walk along the summits of human experience. Great men, great ideas, great books, were what was wanted. We have now reversed our direction, and moved from the summit into the gutter. It is the culture of the poor, not the culture of the cultured, that we are interested in.”

Gay defied this radical turn: “We have no reason to assume that the modish fixation on the illiterate is any more likely to produce truly balanced history that the earlier fixation on the literate.” According to him, the cultural historian of the future has to embrace both. His rebuff of intellectual vogues that implicated the scholar’s individuality, was set in the provoking tones of his campaign for more Enlightenment. In a 1970s lecture, “Who owns history?”, Gay turned against politically correct “cultural fashions” like black studies and the Holocaust (but also against a growing specialism). He maintained that he had no principal objections against the study of “Balkan folk dancing or African history, as long as they were studied seriously instead of tendentiously”. Thus Gay interpreted

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academic freedom differently from the New Left historians: thought should not be dictated by politics. In the 1970s, he recognized with renewed urgency that the call for more socially relevant scholarship threatened intellectual freedom: “I confess to having contributed a little to our amusement at these dangerous games by writing about them in lighthearted spirit. Today I recognize that there was nothing funny about these games at all. Our amusement is a symptom of our distance from the events themselves—the philosophes’ battle remains our battle.”  

Too much emphasis on the politics of historical scholarship asked for one-sided, ideological scholarship: “As long as we live in our tense and complex world, there is much to be said for training officials who know something of the language history and culture of the areas they are dealing with, even if they are not dedicated agents of revolutionary socialism.”

According to Gay, the fundament of social change was grounded in an ongoing dialectic between culture and politics, not their equalization; only a more or less protected cultural domain produced an atmosphere of freedom out of which social criticism could ultimately grow: “Its relevance is paradoxical; it emerges only when it is unsought.”

**Weimar’s Light and Darkness**

In *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (1966) Gay discusses the liberal tradition on a German stage for the first time since *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, which he had published fourteen years earlier. While the German socialist had not been his first choice of subject, *Weimar Culture* was not his own initiative. The book was initially written as an introductory essay to the volume of essays *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930-1960* (1969), edited by the American intellectual historians Donald Flemming and Bernard Bailyn. Gay’s long essay served to evoke the background of the first-generation German émigré intellectuals, including Neumann, Adorno and Paul Lazarsfeld, whose biographies were individually examined in the volume. These collected essays illustrated American scholars’ rising awareness of large groups of European, predominantly German émigré intellectuals had come to their country to leave a mark on many American intellectual and

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cultural traditions. Another example of this was the volume edited by Laura Fermi, the wife of the then deceased physicist Enrico Fermi: *Illustrious immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930-41* (1968).

In his essay, Gay wanted to show what made Weimar culture “so adventurous. In 1933 a lot of people wanted to get out, but this was something important.” He gave four lectures based on his introduction for *The Intellectual Migration* at Columbia’s Teacher College in the presence of many German émigrés: “It was a kind of festive occasion.” German culture, he underlined, was not merely “bad”: “there was nothing like this in English. There were books about Weimar’s politics and cultural history was a dubious category; so many bad things came out of that miserable defeat. But I thought that this essay would be a real pleasure to write.” He decided to turn the essay into a book: “What I can still remember, I had a room to myself that began filling up with books about Weimar. I didn’t look at the exact bibliography of that period. I wrote it really fast.” It was fellow émigré historian Mosse who, together with his own wife Ruth, convinced him to make his essay into a book: “I will always be grateful to you for that suggestion.”

*Weimar Culture* is a dramatic reconstruction of the republic’s intellectual and cultural life that derives its energy from three central oppositions: reason versus poetry, democracy versus community and father versus son. In the context of Weimar, these oppositions structure Gay’s re-envisioning of the battle between rationality and irrationality that shaped his work on the Enlightenment. In his review-essay of the second edition of *Weimar Culture*, A. Grenville pointed to Gay’s successful translation of his liberal narrative to the German scene: “His overall categories headings have passed into common scholarly usage: ‘The Revolt of the Son’, in the years immediately after 1918, is superseded by ‘The Revenge of the Father’”. The book’s subtitle, “The Outsider as Insider”, has become a “classic formulation”. “The outsider as insider” reflects Gay’s thesis that outsiders—the Jews, socialists and democrats—became the decision-makers in museums, orchestras, theatres, private

687 Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
688 Ibidem.
689 Ibidem.
690 “Letter to Mosse”, 22 April 1970; Peter Gay Papers; Box 7.
centers of scholarship during the Weimar Republic. The subtitle was inspired by Hofstadter’s *The American Political Tradition*, which used similar dialectics to define American politics.

*Weimar Culture* clashed with many scholars’ redefinition of “culture” in the 1960s. While Déak, Poor and Lebovics’ works on Weimar lack a sensitivity to aesthetics, *Weimar Culture* is an account of the republic’s “creative energy” that New Left scholarship considered “old-fashioned”. Gay’s “unfailing attachment to the Enlightenment” provoked Schorske to observe: “He is a man of such pronounced conviction that he judges virtually every cultural tendency by the standards of liberal political rationalism.” 692 Walter Laqueur wrote Gay: “I don’t like the title but can’t think of a better one.” 693 Laqueur perceived that Gay smoothed over the sharp edges of the republic in his denial of its “real” outsiders, ignoring Marxism and activities of the extreme Left and Jews. He asked why Gay concentrated so much on the republic’s surviving elements. He himself would have analysed “at some greater length the weaknesses of Weimar culture”. 694 In 1971, during the conference “Weimar Germany, 1919-1932: Intellectuals, Culture and Politics” at the New School for Social Research, Gay defended Weimar’s intellectuals against Laqueur and others’ attacks: “Mr. Laqueur and Mr. Pacher told us that Weimar intellectuals have no influence, but that they ruined the republic; that they were needy, neurotic fools, who together made up a Periclean republic. But then mr. Friedrich explained it all by telling us that there were no Weimar intellectuals, but that on the whole their influence was salutary.” 695

At first sight, *Weimar Culture* reads largely as an overview of Weimar’s intellectual and cultural achievements that were preserved in American exile. Gay starts his book stating: “The exile holds an honoured place in the history of western civilization.” 696 He went on to discuss the influential émigré intellectuals such as Marcuse, Richard Löwenthal, Erich Fromm and Walter Benjamin, when they were still members of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt. The book was grounded in many interviews with émigré intellectuals, among whom Hannah Arendt and Felix Gilbert, and

692 Schorske, “Weimar and the Intellectuals II”.
693 “Letter of Walter Laqueur to Gay”, 12 July 1968; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2.
694 Ibidem.
examined their letters and autobiographies. Gay dedicated the book to the German-American Renaissance historian Gilbert, the “Ambassador of the Weimar Spirit” in the United States. However, the above criticism ignored Gay’s expansion of American views on Weimar's culture beyond cabaret and art: “That part of Weimar culture which most non-German intellectuals at one time took to be the whole.”697 He dealt with aspects of Weimar culture that hitherto had remained largely overlooked: the Warburg Institute, the Hochschule für Politik and the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. He touched on the republic’s publishing companies, the cult-status of Hölderlin and Kleist and the significance of Rilke and Hofmannsthal for Weimar intellectuals.

The Responsibility of Weimar Intellectuals

Many scholars failed to appreciate the complexity of Gay’s dramatic enactment of his argument in Weimar Culture, which aimed to put German and American culture in a critical and constructive relationship to each other. There were many ties of Weimar Culture to the American 1960s. Gay described Weimar's psychological mechanisms as “analogies”, which refers to their construction in-between the past and the present.698 Inspired by Freud Gay pushed the problem of a generation gap to the center of his book; the betrayal by Weimar's elite of the younger generation featured both in Weimar Culture and his commentary on the student movement. Much of his analysis of Weimar echoed his criticism of the student movement. In a reaction to Nathan Glazer’s review of Weimar Culture, Gay confirmed the resemblance “in more than accidental ways” between “the Nazi students of the 1920s and student rebels of 1960s, the timid German intellectuals of their day and the timid American of ours”. But paradoxical by principle, Gay adamantly rejected the historical parallel as a key to his book’s significance: “A good deal of the intellectual mischief surrounding our involvement in Vietnam rests on false analogy—that of surrender at Munich. It should teach us that analogies, no matter how tempting, are dangerous things. No: America is not Weimar.”699 True to his embrace of

697 Schorske, “Weimar and the Intellectuals II”.
both objectivity and contemporary meaning, Gay dared, as we will also see, to remain ambivalent in controversy.

In *Weimar Culture*, Gay zoomed in on German intellectuals’ peculiar response to modernity—following other historians in the United States such as Mosse, Stern and Leonard Krieger. He especially examined the irrational factor of intellectuals’ political thinking: “Their republicanism had reasons which their reason did not know.” The “unpolitical German” is therefore a less representative figure. The historian must be as skeptical of him as he must be of all convenient self-appraisals: “foolish politics is still politics”. The many newspapers and the massive participation in elections “strongly suggest that Germans took to politics with passion”. So years before Geoff Eley and David Blackbourne Gay criticized the concept of the “unpolitical German”. He added that Hannah Arendt was wrong in this regard. The differences between Germany and other countries such as England and France were not so significant. Apparently, the nineteenth-century German had made progress, since Gay claimed in his work on the Enlightenment that German Aufklärer were still “isolated, impotent, and almost wholly unpolitical”. The nineteenth-century German, on the other hand, did not “merely theorize, but actively engaged in efforts to translate ideals and interests into reality. It was a kind of politics, to be sure, of which the Anglo-American traditions are thoroughly suspicious: a politics of extreme engagement in both its early ‘idealistic’ and later ‘realistic’ phases.”

Yet, Gay noted that “on another level” an aversion to politics shaped German intellectuals’ stance, which became increasingly clear during the Weimar Republic. Interested in cultural continuities rather than political events, he set out to trace the “emotional roots” of the republic’s politics. The “trauma of its birth” delayed the republic’s maturity. The First World War destroyed the republic’s international ties, and the memory of its losses made it too porous. Weimar intellectuals did not live up to Gay’s moral realism. According to him, leading German intellectuals, poets and professors made an informal, largely tacit agreement with their state: they would abstain from criticism, if the state in turn allowed them freedom to lead somewhat irregular lives and hold

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701 Idem., 70-1.
unorthodox opinions in philosophy and religion. Gay borrowed the term Vulgäridealismus from Fritz Stern to pinpoint the division between culture and politics. Germans had little experience with politics and their view on political reality was distorted: “A feeling spread that all power, all authority, was corrupt and obsolete, and with it came a revival of a kind of pre-Machiavellian morality, the insistence that politics must be judged in purely moral terms.” This “pre-Machiavellian morality”, which opened the door to fateful opportunism, subsequently led to the collaboration of Vernunftrepublikaner with the military. Inspiring democratic models or symbols were not available to lure Germans out of this devils pact with the military. Intellectuals’ cool rationalism was much better equipped to find the republic's defects than its merits. Their “intellectual style”, more critical than constructive, kept the rational republicans from forming a party or laying down a program. Therefore, the book’s subtitle “the outsider as insider” does not merely indicate a development in time, but also reflects Gay's view that German intellectuals failed to take both roles to criticize society while carrying responsibility for its future. Gay criticized members of the elite who allied themselves to Weimar students and pointed to an obsession with youth, violence and ideology. The outsiders of the republic had a “youthful desire” to reject established ideas and institutions. Gay refuted historians who downplayed the role of psychology and ideas in politics: “Commitments to the old and a new order were not merely masks for economical interests but profoundly felt ideals and regrets.” With the election of Reichspresident Hindenburg in 1925, the revenge of the “fathers” began. Freud’s conflict between “fathers” and “sons” orchestrated the psychological drama of the republic. The fathers were “ideologues who regretted the loss of traditions and the lost empire”.

Ironically, critics of Weimar Culture accused Gay of a similar lack of “realism” that the historian himself so clearly attributed to Weimar intellectuals. They perceived that Weimar Culture was not properly examined within the context of the republic's social and political reality: “Any

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704 Idem., 73.
705 Idem., 11.
706 Ibidem.
707 Idem., 90.
708 Idem., vii.
709 Idem., viii
710 Idem., vii.
analysis which does not take into account the whole political, economic, and social situation of Weimar Germany, and of Contemporary Britain is bound to be misleading. Yet it should be noticed that Gay examined his subject on the level of perception and national myth. No critic of Weimar Culture seems to have asked himself why Gay attached a separate account of the republic’s political events at the end of his book. This served to explicitly detach Weimar’s culture from its politics, while re-establishing it in its connections to the American present. At the end of his narrative of Weimar’s culture, Gay states that it had not been in Weimar but in the United States that “the spirit of Weimar was given its true home in exile”. At first sight, Gay’s schematic display of the transatlantic relationship seems to simplify both cultures: while the German exile offered the American present its intellectual and cultural traditions, American culture brings its democratic, practical thinking to the table, which pointed out Weimar intellectuals’ failure. But Gay’s dialectics also confronted Americans with the still widespread anti-intellectualism, because he showed that gradual change demanded a strong link between culture and politics. At the same time, Weimar culture’s confrontation with American liberalism allowed Gay to simultaneously broaden it, relating it to the nineteenth century and its connections to the rest of European culture. Again, the American present served to partly liberate the German past: “The Weimar style was born before the Weimar's republic; the republic created little; it liberated what was already there. This style was also larger than Germany that was part of Western history.” Weimar’s cultural “style” reflected a set of attitudes and ideas that anticipated the birth of the republic. The “vitality” and “unselfconscious internationalism” of Weimar culture connected it to other European cultural movements. Connecting French and German culture, Gay integrated elements of Weimar into the enlightened tradition; a Weimar representative such as Aby Warburg “believed in the power of reason; he was an Aufklärer”. In Freud, Jews and Other Germans, he elaborated on the connections between German and European modernism.

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712 Gay, Weimar Culture, 145.
713 Idem., 6.
714 Idem., 8.
715 Idem., 33.
716 Chapter V elaborates on the connections between German Jews and modernism.
After Weimar Culture

As Gay announced in *Weimar Culture*, he did plan a work that captured Weimar’s spirit to a much more ambitious extent, but he never followed up on his promise. There are in fact surviving notes of this intended successor, which show that the thesis of this project echoes *Weimar Culture*’s central argument that the period 1890-1933 forms “an indissoluble whole” in German history. He explained that its provisional title, “The Weimar Renaissance: Berlin”, was a reference to Burckhardt’s famous work about the Italian Renaissance.\(^{717}\) The colorful contrasts of Burckhardt’s view on the Renaissance offered a model for Gay’s own staging of Weimar’s past: “Burckhardt’s view on the Renaissance was that it was a time of extremes, more noticeable than other times because of the feverish heightening of its most distinctive elements. This, too, was true of Weimar’s great achievements, great crimes, great individuality.”\(^{718}\) In *Weimar Culture*, these extremes were illustrated by the republic’s clash between generations; in *The Weimar Renaissance* the dialogue between past and present takes the form of an actual conversation between historical protagonists. The incomplete draft of his first chapter, “City of Rage and Laughter: Berlin, 1860-1930’, starts with a dialogue between the German novelists Theodor Fontane, Kurt Tucholsky and the cartoonist Hermann Zille: “Fontane: Berlin! A splendid subject! An irresistible subject!/ Tucholsky: I wish he had resisted it!/ Zille: Immer mismachen! Always sour! But that is how all you Jewish humorists are./ Tucholsky: I was a Lutheran!” Fighting about the way to represent the city of Berlin best, Fontane calls it an “experiment with total history”: “Gentlemen! Total history is an effort of the imagination to represent reality.” Tucholsky answered: “Just as I feared: and he calls himself a scientist…(etc.).” Here, Gay dramatized the abstract problem of historical knowledge that was woven into the fabric of western culture.

Having finished *The Science of Freedom*, Gay published an actual dialogue between intellectuals, a “political epilogue to this long historical essay”.\(^{719}\) *The Bridge of Criticism: Dialogues among Lucian, Erasmus and Voltaire about the Enlightenment – On History and Hope, Imagination*

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\(^{717}\) Gay, “The Weimar Renaissance”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1.

\(^{718}\) Ibidem.

\(^{719}\) Gay, *The Science of Freedom*, xi. He was initially toying with the idea of including a dialogue into *The Science of Freedom*, but eventually gave up on that idea.
and Reason, Constraint and Freedom– And Its Meaning for Our Time\textsuperscript{720} consists of five dialogues in which Voltaire takes the role as the defendant, Erasmus as the prosecutor and Lucian as the mediating Ancient. These protagonists have all written satirical and critical portraits of their own time. The five dialogues are the realization of an idea of Edward Gibbon, who wanted to use them in order to confront a “blind and fanatic multitude” with its prejudices. Lucian expresses the difficulty of speaking to his twentieth-century audience: “Can you expect to speak to the twentieth century, an age brought up on philosophies of the absurd, nihilism, hardened by organised murder, deafened by the noise and blinded by the glitter of mass-civilization? To administer your writings to modern man is holding out a twig to a drowning swimmer: he may freely appreciate your attentions, but you will not save him.”\textsuperscript{721} This dialogue illustrates that Gay did not approach time lineair, but as a series of possible analogies to inspire the present: “Voltaire: The twentieth-century historian is far more of a technician than we could hope to be. We were far more philosophical than he could hope to be. We lost something by the change; so has he.”\textsuperscript{722} Voltaire’s campaign continued to be directed against twentieth-century historians’ narrow focus.

Gay never finished his intended successor to Weimar’s history. After moving to Yale in 1969, he stayed his first year at the University of Cambridge to “rethink my future course. What I decided to do was to work on 19th-century culture, and I have continued to do that since”.\textsuperscript{723} He now became exclusively interested in “the beginning of the imperial period”.\textsuperscript{724} In a letter to a colleague, Gay explained: “I recognize that I made a promise in the preface of Weimar culture that I would write a comprehensive history of the Weimar Republic. I have not redeemed that promise because in the course of writing that little book I got so interested in the 19th century, the roots of it all, that I am working at that now. But perhaps one of these days I will return to it.”\textsuperscript{725} Of course, already in Weimar Culture he had claimed that the republic’s culture originated in the nineteenth century. A focus on


\textsuperscript{721} Idem., 23.

\textsuperscript{722} Idem., 63.

\textsuperscript{723} “Letter to Glenda Sluga”.

\textsuperscript{724} “Letter to Richard Wiatr”, 14 January 1981; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2.
Weimar’s birth connected twentieth-century disaster with the generally more hopeful nineteenth-century, which “confirmed the expectations of the eighteenth, realizing beyond the wildest dreams of a Condorcet, what the philosophes had only glimpsed as remote possibility”.726 His view of the nineteenth century with its rising bourgeois and liberal promise had much more to offer the American present than the “feverish heights” of the Weimar Republic:

“As a historian, I hesitate to make invidious comparisons, but in view of the century that followed the 19th, I can only reiterate that the Victorian age was an admirable century, and that the bourgeoisie may take much of the credit for that. One thinks back on the 20th century with horror. The barbarity of this age make the achievements of Genghis Khan pale with jealousy: cowardly collusion with totalitarians, mass murders committed in the name of socialism, scientifically organised genocide originated and largely carried out by one of Europe’s renowned bastions of culture. The changes for continued peace seemed promising. Surely, there was no reason why bourgeois should not continue to live in a world they were increasingly shaping.”727

So while most historians continued to interpret Weimar in the context of the Third Reich, Gay moved stubbornly backwards in history, highlighting the ties between the present and a more peaceful period. A focus on the nineteenth century, closer to us than the eighteenth, effectively led him to the tradition of the Enlightenment: “We are the offspring of generations of hope, which was initially planted by the Enlightenment.”728 It appealed to Gay’s sense of historical complexity that he perceived the end of the nineteenth century, so central in his work on the bourgeoisie and in his biography of Freud, as the rise of twentieth-century ideology and war, as well: “The divergence of the German ‘mind’ from the west had its inception then (Holborn, Krieger) and the legacy of the Napoleonic era, the events of 1848-9, of 1862, remains visible. Perhaps the course of German history was driven to its final channels then. Certainly 1870-1”729 There was less anti-Semitism, although it continues to inform bourgeois attitude and political strategy. To the critics of the Enlightenment, Gay replied that the technicians of the

726 Gay, “Against the Gravediggers”, 847.
729 Gay, “The Weimar Renaissance”.

177
nineteenth—not the eighteenth!—century were to blame for the abstraction of modern ideology:

“Planners for an industrial age governed by omnipotent technicians, men like Saint-Simon and Comte, were deeply indebted to the writings of such clerical revolutionaries as De Maistre, behind whom stands the long tradition of Catholic Christianity.” Gay did believe in a German Sonderweg, but only since the end of the nineteenth century, while he was careful to point to its more hopeful tendencies. In Voltaire’s Politics the historian noted that Holborn explicated the gulf between “western” and “unpolitical” German intellectuals: “I learned much from its comparison between the French and the German situations.” Still, as early as Voltaire’s Politics, Gay did not see western institutions as models for the rest of the world. Unlike conservative German historians he did not merely intend to save German intellectual and cultural traditions, as some critics have professed, but rather made an effort to explain why some of them could still be relevant in an interaction with postwar American culture.

Moreover, Gay’s attitude towards German intellectual and cultural traditions, and its presentation in his work, did not just gradually become more inclusive. In Voltaire’s Politics, he claimed that German historicism had from early on defended the philosophe’s reputation, but this view was corrected in his synthesis of the Enlightenment. His volumes on the Enlightenment are scattered with dismissive remarks; Germans in the eighteenth century were “still groping for a cultivation that others already had firmly in their possession. […] As the German writers themselves were the first to insist: civilizing the Teuton was a slow, disheartening business.” Yet the vehemence of his expressions did not so much point to his stronger historical determinism, but to his dialectical approach to German history: his larger inclusion of German intellectual traditions was confronted with a fresh depiction of its defects. Ultimately, the tension between “good” and “bad” Germany in his work is never resolved.

731 Gay, Voltaire’s Politics, 383.
732 Gay notes that “Ranke and his followers” in fact struck at Voltaire to create an ideology for Prussian and German expansionism. They criticized the philosophes for “failing to do justice to the irrational nature of power.” They dismissed their political judgments as “Utopian, unrealistic, unpolitical”, resulting in a “self-satisfied historicism”. The Rise of Modern Paganism, 326.
733 Ibidem.
In his research on the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie Gay integrated Germany into western culture once more, while this subject allowed him to deal with a subject that was broader than Germany alone.\textsuperscript{734} “In the early 1970s, I became interested in the Victorian bourgeoisie as a historical topic relatively neglected by my profession.”\textsuperscript{735} His five volumes on the bourgeoisie were published between 1984 and 1998 ranged from the 1820s to 1914. In these works, he paid as much attention to German psychologists, politicians, painters, novelists and literary critics as he did to their British, French and American counterparts. In a letter to Gay, George Mosse pointed out the novelty of Gay’s work on the bourgeoisie: “The middle class have become the whipping boy of so many historians, and with it the kind of ideals for which it stood and worked, which are our own ideals as well.”\textsuperscript{736} While many historians of the 1960s documented the working class, Gay now decided to probe the often vilified middle-classes and firmly put them in the liberal tradition since the Enlightenment: “The philosophes had set the stage for a new hero: the pacific, tolerant, secular bourgeois, the man who prefers prudence and profits to glory, and who disdains aristocrats for making a fetish of organized murder they called war. The family was the icon the 19\textsuperscript{th} century middle class worshipped, domestic felicity.”\textsuperscript{737} Like the philosophes, the bourgeoisie paired artistic innovation to its embeddedness in cultural traditions. Similarly, in his biography of his hero, \textit{Freud: A Life for Our Time} (1988), Gay presents the psychoanalyst as a liberal bourgeois, whose work ethos and family life were the two pillars of his existence. Thus embedded, Freud was a pioneer whose daring explorations could in the nineteenth century only be matched by Darwin.

\textbf{Gay’s Style}

In his article “Against the Gravediggers”, which was first conceived as a keynote address at the Fourth International Congress on the Enlightenment in 1976, Gay observed that the spirit of the age had not evaporated: “The patient is not yet wholly recovered and shows occasional symptoms of relapse.”\textsuperscript{738}

\textsuperscript{734} Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
\textsuperscript{735} Gay, \textit{Schnitzler’s Century}, xxiii.
\textsuperscript{736} “Letter of George Mosse to Gay”, 16 September 1998; Peter Gay Papers; Box 20; Unprocessed.
\textsuperscript{737} Gay, \textit{Schnitzler’s Century}, 32.
\textsuperscript{738} Idem., 837.
He noted that the dilemma of the scholar in 1968 was whether he should abandon the ideal of objectivity or not: “If they chose the first, they lost their self-respect; if they chose the second they lost their students.” According to Novick, this complex situation, which again echoed Bernstein’s dilemma of “principles” or “power”, explained why the “anger” of Gay and so many others grew with campus events in the late sixties. Gay himself, however, never wavered in his attempt to overcome this dilemma and set out to campaign ardently against the loss of belief in the ideal of objectivity in the 1960s.

Gay suspected that being skeptic about objectivity was largely popular among historians, because it rescued them from the imputation of naiveté. Although he himself cared for his reputation and was sweeping and skeptical about many things, he loudly proclaimed the hazards of too much historical relativism. To persuade new generations of historians he concocted new, Anglo-Saxon underpinnings of historicists’ balance between relativism and a definition of history. Gay’s aim to strengthen historical objectivity own campaign for more objectivity was paradoxically grounded in his further cultivation of “style”. His own style was first developed in early literary aspirations: “My concern with style is much older than my decision to become a historian.” In Nazi Germany already he completed a novel. As a student at the University of Denver, he even cherished ambitions to become a novelist: “In those days I wanted to be a novelist–someone like Ernest Hemingway. I wrote short stories in the laconic style of Hemingway’s ‘The Killers’. Fortunately for American letters, none of my stories was ever published.” At Columbia, he continued to write fiction, albeit not always successfully. On April 16, 1948, The Magazine of the Year rejected his satire “The U.S. Cabinet 1949-1979”; a year earlier he had in vain offered his play “Illusion” for possible production to The American National Theatre and Academy. Despite these setbacks, he would continue writing fiction throughout his career as a historian.

Hofstadter became an important inspiration for his own developing style. The literary qualities of the Americanist’s work, which attracted a broad public, made a lasting impression: “The labor that

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739 Novick, 611.
740 Gay, Style in History, 195.
741 Idem., ix.
742 “Letter of The Magazine of the Year to Gay”, 16 April 1948; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1.
style exacts from even its most graceful practitioners was born in on me in the summer of 1954, when I shared a house with the Hofstadters and watched Dick composing the introduction to his The Age of Reform and revising the whole manuscript for the publisher.” Gay and Hofstadter had read and commented on each other’s work since the early 1950s: “Hofstadter taught me a lot about writing. I still at times take one of his books from the shelf and refresh myself with a paragraph or two.” Like Hofstadter’s, his style was designed to bridge the gap he observed between intellectuals and the public: “American scholars will have to learn what English and French scholars have long known: they must write their own general works. Popularization is too serious a matter to be left to the populists.” Just after the publication of Voltaire’s Politics, however, he harbored fears that other scholars would mistake his literary style for a lack of scholarly rigidity. But Hofstadter reassured the younger scholar: “Don’t worry about your book. It will not be received as popular book, but as scholarly and fairly specialized.” In the 1960s these fears largely vanished for a more determined stance against intellectuals’ isolation from their readers: “Yet the accepted view of the Enlightenment does not reflect the work of the specialists: I can think of no area of historical study in which the gap between the scholar and the general public is as wide, and as fateful, as it is with the Enlightenment.” Not all members of his department greeted Gay’s intellectual “populism” with as much enthusiasm. In a letter, Jacques Barzun firmly pointed to the limits of this popular style: “Your lecture title for October 23 ‘Macaulay: The Whig as Debate Coach’ is unworthy of you and this university. One is not bound to like or admire Macaulay, but if he is treated, he must be treated as the great historian he is and as befits the humble scholars we are.”

The central position of style in Gay’s work encountered the criticism that he fixated on the presentation of his argument. F.L Ford referred to Gay’s “lawyer skills” to indicate the historian’s abundant use of strategy. R.R. Palmer added: “A certain slashing insistency, together with a habit of

743 Gay, Style in History, 13.
744 Quoted in Brown, Richard Hofstadter, 65.
745 Gay, “Against the Gravediggers”, 32.
746 “Letter of Richard Hofstadter to Gay”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2.2.
748 “Letter of Jacques Barzun to Gay”, 6 October 1961; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2.2.
phrase-making, which leaves his position open to possible question."\(^{750}\) Also Novick was critical. The historian noted that he did not understand why a narrative style and a defense of objectivity often go together.\(^{751}\) Gay, however, was convinced that a literary dramatization was an essential part of historians' striving for objectivity. He considered the careful cultivation of style above all a way to enlarge his control over readers’ interpretations of the text: “History is both art and science, both stable and progressive.”\(^{752}\) His inclusion of a long, awe-inspiring bibliographical essay at the end of each book, a habit that he copied from Hofstadter, activated a dynamic with the literary style of his text.

While German scholars had influenced Gay’s historical approach in the 1950s, Anglo-Saxon scholars did so in the 1960s. He noted that his most rewarding reading at the end of the 1960s was not in the field of historiography but in philosophy, notably the works of the logical empiricists Carl Hempel, Ernest Nagel and J.L. Austin.\(^{753}\) He had become acquainted with Hempel, who “proved a genial instructor in the logic of historical scholarship”, in 1966 at Princeton.\(^{754}\) He began to develop “a kind of perspectival realism” in his lecturing to prove that “objectivity, though difficult, is not impossible”.\(^{755}\) This implies that the limitations of a particular point of view should not just be dismissed as insignificant, because the things that are observed are in fact happening. In fact, his own experiences could allow him to see things that others didn’t. In Gay’s work, a clear identity is reflected not only in explicit statements, but above all in his “style”. Therefore, in *Style in History* he claims that style cannot be separated from the content of a work.\(^{756}\)


\(^{751}\) Novick, 235.

\(^{752}\) Gay, *Style in History*, ix.

\(^{753}\) Idem., x.

\(^{754}\) Hempel and Nagel were criticized by the philosopher Austin, whose theory of speech acts upset more traditional notions of the relationship between language and experience. Of course, Gay went to the heart of the matter: he positioned himself in the center of these thinkers’ conflict. Other theorists that expanded Gay’s insights into style were John Pocock and Quentin Skinner, who were influenced by Austin as well. Pocock and Skinner’s approach to political theory paid more attention to the contextualization of texts, approaching them as part of a dialogue with other texts.

\(^{755}\) Gay, “Course notes: ‘The History of History’”.

\(^{756}\) Gay would publish two more books exclusively dedicated to historical theory: *Art and Act. On Causes in History: Manet, Gropius, Mondrian* (New York, 1976) and *Freud for Historians* (Oxford, 1985). These works mainly explain ideas that have been implicit in his earlier work. In *Art and Act*, Gay re-emphasizes the importance of perception in the causes of events. He distinguishes three domains that shape individual perception: culture, craft and character. The “culture” in which the actor operates shapes the possibilities of his
However, the publication of Style in History in 1974 was overshadowed by another book on historians’ literary style that was published a year earlier, Hayden White’s Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe. While White employed more formal literary analysis, outside the historical context, Gay’s understanding of style was closely tied to the human mind and the historical context. This insight resonated in his criticism of the protesting students, whose ideological thinking partly originated in their mistaken, radical identification with the Third World that ignored their ties to their own past. He also considered it a condition for scholarly debates that the historian had a very clear insight into his own political, social, psychological and cultural position; the most complete self-awareness prompted the most defined dynamics with other historians’ perspectives. Therefore, individual identity and objectivity were no contradictions but part of a dialectic in which they could even enforce one another.

Freud, of course, contributed to Gay’s display of self-awareness; the objectivity of historical writings does not depend on its capacity to generate laws, but had to borrow from other disciplines, “mainly psychology”. One must not think that this use of psychology is a surrender to relativism; after all, the historian –“whether he knows it or not”– always operates with a theory of human nature, albeit he generally deals with “motivation, or with psychological causes in general, in a remarkably casual way”. Consequently, Style in History claims that the personalities of the four historians that are central to his book –John Gibbon, Geoffrey Macauley, Ranke and Burckhardt– endow them uniquely with insights specifying aspects of the past which might go unnoticed otherwise: “While normally the historian of history proceeds from apparent objectivity to concealed subjectivity, I propose that he can profitably reverse this procedure and move from subjectivity to understanding.” A “mature” literary style is at once individual and social, private and public, shows a mixture of self-expression and self-control and can be learned.

In his review of Style in History, White called Gay’s statements about objectivity “ironic”, but not especially perceptive. White regretted that Gay did not seem to have drawn “in any systematic actions; “character” refers to the relations between the individual and the outside world; “craft” to his professional training.

757 Gay, Freud for Historians, 6, 33.
758 Gay, Style in History, 199.
way” on the theoretical works of his “excellent” bibliographical list. He missed a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between historians’ use of a literary style and the idea that the past is “out there”. According to him, Gay’s claim that “history is almost a science and more than a science” served in the first place his political agenda: “History is a mystery best left obscured in the interest of promoting that freedom and tolerance of which he has been a champion all his life.”

Indeed, Gay’s fear of putting history in an ideological straitjacket made him hesitant to pursue too much theory building. But he did not “mystify” the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. White fails to notice that the assertion that “history is almost a science and more than a science” was no refusal to define history, but a modernist enactment of his belief that the dynamics between subjectivity and objectivity cannot be resolved. Historical writing, therefore, is an ongoing process: “The process of interpretation will never end.”

His justification of this “commonplace” varies from other historians’ relativism, because he puts forward that “events have posterities that may continue to the end of time”. Again, he reacted against a fear of modernity that regards ambivalence and complexity merely as sources of insecurity. He countered that historical complexity contained a liberating sense of the openness of history: the present is in many ways determined but not captivated by the past. Historical definition, therefore, was made in relationship to the usefulness of the past for the present.

Since the end of the 1960s, Gay himself was more and more present in his work. His declaration of admiration in The Rise of Modern Paganism for a new hero, the philosopher David Hume, illustrates this development. In spite of his stylistic brilliance, the “anti-Semite” Voltaire was a problematic representative of the Enlightenment. Gay now called him the “the most passionate and representative” of intellectuals’ “interest in the eighteenth century”.

The academic and rigidly secular Hume, whom he had admired since he was a student, invoked a different image of the philosophe than the avid and calculating campaigner: “He was simply the purest, most modern

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759 Hayden White claimed that the more theoretical introduction and conclusion did not appear to have been thought through carefully to contribute significantly to the current debate about the nature of history either as art or as science. He thought that the real worth of this book lies in the insights offered into the lives of the historians: “Review: Peter Gay’s Style in History”, The Journal of Modern History, Vol. 47, No. 3 (September 1975) 539-540, 539.

760 Gay, Style in History, 212.

specimen of the group.” Hume, therefore, was “at the same time the most isolated and the most representative of the philosophes”\textsuperscript{762}. While the shift of Gay’s preferences from Bernstein to Voltaire in the 1950s represented the first stage of his growing appreciation of literary style, his move to Hume indicated that not a philosophe but the historian himself became the Enlightenment’s foremost campaigner. The tension between Hume and the campaigner Gay, who did not hide his own “ideology”, contrasted and linked the past and the present in their need for one another.

**Tradition of Popularizers**

Gay’s expression of his own “identity” in his historical writings entailed the form and substance of his work mirroring each other in increasingly sophisticated ways. In his synthesis of the Enlightenment, Gay and the philosophes reflect each other’s use of psychology, history, empiricism and rhetoric. They shared a responsibility for the significance of their work in their own time and defended a “cosmopolitan” stance, “widening the area of historical inquiry to India, Spanish America, and medieval Europe”.\textsuperscript{763} Their cultivation of style pursued a unity between form and content that served to clarify the meaning of Gay’s work, while putting the historian himself in the tradition of the Enlightenment.

Gay constructed a tradition of liberal popularizers who realized this necessary congruence between style and content. Voltaire was the “most lucid popularizer”\textsuperscript{764} of the Enlightenment, whose attractive style helped to set rationality on fire. Psychoanalysis stood for a style of thinking that many Germans recognized, enjoyed and found indispensable in talks about poets and poetry—although the irony was, according to Gay, that nobody talked about Freud, but that everybody used him.\textsuperscript{765} Freud’s engaging style explains his overall neglect of the rest of the psychoanalytical tradition. At the same time, Freud’s own stance against irrational chaos and authoritarianism was clearly stated, as was the case in work of other intellectuals that inspired Gay, such as Marc Bloch and Cassirer: “Freud, the man who above all others is supposed to have destroyed the justification of Enlightenment rationalism,

\textsuperscript{764} Gay, “America the Paradoxical”, 851.
\textsuperscript{765} Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 45.
was the greatest child of the Enlightenment, which our century has known."766 Freud was the rightful successor of the eighteenth-century philosophes, because he expanded man’s critical capacities. The representatives of his enlightened tradition assert that the research of irrationality could also be used to support the liberal cause, instead of being the exclusive domain of Romanticism. But this did not imply relativizing the dichotomy between the philosophes and the romantics; liberal traditions solidified their very different intentions. In this sense, Gay’s definition of a liberal tradition helped him to portray historical ambivalence and complexity, which placed conflict at the heart of western culture without affecting its identity.

This convolution of subject and “style” implies that Gay’s historical narratives to a large extent deal with the genesis of his methodology; it did not only explain the past in his work, but also the way in which it was constructed. In this respect his work can be related to Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, which traces man's emancipation from mythical belief “to arrive at a stage of modern and enlightened self-consciousness: the analysis of symbolism, in its breakthrough from myth to modernity, itself thereby became a historical achievement”.767 Similarly, Gay’s oeuvre defines the representatives of his critical-constructive approach, running from the philosophes to the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, from Freud to Weimar culture. He embedded his use of psychoanalysis, Kulturgeschichte and Weimar culture in this same tradition of the Enlightenment: “I regard the program of universal cultural history as an achievement of the Enlightenment –not born there– they opened our eyes to the import of cultural phenomena that conventional history-writing had hitherto wholly ignored.”768 When Gay shifted his attention to the nineteenth century, he achieved an even larger unity of content and methodology than before. He scrutinized the mind of the bourgeoisie, of which Freud was a proud member, with a further refinement of his psychoanalytical approach: “The 19th century, which was of course his century, was in many respects hospitable to him.”769

766 Quoted in H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society. The Reorientation of European Social Thought (New York, 1977) 43.
767 Gordon, Continental Divide, 11.
768 Gay, “Course notes: Intellectual History”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 8.2. Rare Books and Manuscripts Room, Columbia University.
examined the period in which his methodology originated, which historicizes and justifies his own work.

In his volume of essays *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* (1979), the dramatization of western conflict unfolds in a schematic representation of modern psychology: “The need to order experience through polarities seems to be deeply anchored in the human psyche.” He universalized the struggle between the Enlightenment and Romanticism in a tension between rationality and irrationality that was part of human nature. In *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, he claims that the Enlightenment is “the great rebellion of the ego”, which mediates between the id (instincts) and the superego (the moral and critical part), against exclusively irrational authority. These ordering “polarities” are reflected by the centrality of the battle of ideology in Gay’s work:

“Convinced that the Enlightenment is, among other things, a thoroughgoing rebellion against Christian ethics and the Christian view of passion, I have visualized this rebellion as a dialectic which every reader of Freud will recognize. My procedure may be playful, but I am sure that it is not artificial: fundamental changes in cultural styles are always hard, slow, and attended with painful struggles within the revolutionaries themselves; […] my dialectical triad dramatizes the struggle and its resolution.”

The structure of Gay’s two volumes on the Enlightenment displays an enactment of the narrative of the books: Volume I includes the thesis (experience) and anti-thesis (their education in the Classics), Volume II forms the synthesis—the *philosophes*’ “pursuit of modernity”, fuelled by the “modern” sciences. This dialectical approach to the Enlightenment was, like Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectics of the Enlightenment*, a “German” approach to French history; not only modernity and religion, but also German and French intellectual traditions formed a dialectic that boosted the message of his work. Gay’s references to and use of the tradition of *Geistesgeschichte* dramatized and justified his support of the Enlightenment. In this sense his synthesis is his ultimate answer to the

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prominent position of *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* in the American intellectual landscape. His remarkable silence about this seminal work of the Frankfurt School in his synthesis only stirred postwar dialectics of Enlightenment.

**Gay in the Light of the Sixties**

After the Summer holidays of 1968, Richard Hofstadter was asked to address the students at Columbia. It was custom that the President gave this address, but nobody wanted to hear Grayson Kirk anymore, nor the students, nor the faculty, nor Gay. With the impressions of the escalation of the protests fresh in his memory, the historian begged Hofstadter not to go, afraid of what could happen. But Hofstadter wanted to talk to the students. During his speech, a few students got up and turned their backs to the speaker, but nothing else happened. Still, Gay thought that “it was frightening…It was so strange…I had done well at Columbia…this was our home.”

By the end of the 1960s Gay’s decision to leave Columbia to take a post at Yale was tainted by a feeling of failure. His emotional state of mind during the protests muddled the already polarized dialogue between the generations. His views staggered between extremes: on the one hand he did not take the students’ “role-play” seriously, on the other hand their radicalism triggered his “alarm bells”, a product of his own experiences with National Socialism, rather too quickly. Although the protesting students in many ways continued his own endeavors towards a more cosmopolitan culture, he lost large parts of his young public. Apparently, many students’ “longing for excitement” and commitment to a wider world had not been satisfied by his integrating transatlantic visions of the West. Eventually leftist criticism began to make the German-American exchange programs more controversial among American officials. It has recently been noted that German émigrés’ image of Weimar endowed their thought “with blind spots and oppressive consequences”.

To what degree did Gay’s clash with the protests of the 1960s reveal the limitations of his views on

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773 Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
774 Columbia’s History Department lost another eminent faculty member and expert on western European history this year, the professor of French history Orest Ranum.
775 Fritz Stern, *Five Germany’s I Have Known*, 245.
776 Klimke, 50.
777 Greenberg, 258.
western culture, which was so deeply shaped by intellectual and emotional concerns that seemed to belong to an earlier era?

Often Gay’s plea for more Enlightenment just seemed to reappraise the leading liberal narrative of American culture that differed from students’ own symbols of the American imperialist and its Third World victim. His transatlantic perspective, together with his slight upon too much theoretical construction and his eager play on the suppositions of his reading public, sometimes tended to obscure the novelty of his historical approach. Some historians of European history observed a continuation of German historicism, while Americanists found in his work a confirmation of liberal optimism. Immediately after the publication of *The Enlightenment*, American critics deemed it a rather dated defense of western culture. Gay himself was ready to admit that the essential point of his “social history of ideas” was actually “simple”, emphasizing that it was largely the product of “common sense”. His view on the Enlightenment did not draw on new archival research or propagated many new theoretical insights; he positioned his work firmly in existing literature in order to confront the reader with the subjectivity of his own views. His approach to ideas was not just German import, but resonated with the American pragmatist tradition that had already appealed to him when he was a student, abhorred as he was by all aspects of German culture. Before him, of course, American intellectuals like John Dewey, Charles Beard and James Harvey Robinson had aimed to ameliorate the Enlightenment introducing other disciplines into the writing of history. His historical writings contained a comparable combination of presentism and a search for objectivity as the work of these New Historians, although they pursued different political goals in their estimation of a transatlantic relationship, which made all the difference with Gay’s functionalist approach to ideas.

Many critics misjudged Gay’s defense of historians’ striving for objectivity. Novick, who in 1966 had left Columbia for Chicago, could claim that in the 1960s “the most spirited defense of a

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780 Novick, 231.
781 For that reason, Gay often most vehemently turned against historians whose methodology he resembled most, like Becker and Schorske, to emphasize that he belonged to a different “party”.

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hyperobjectivist position came from Peter Gay”\textsuperscript{782}. In a piece “Yale Enlightened” (1977), \textit{The New York Review of Books} wrote critically about Gay’s speech for the Fourth Congress of Enlightenment Studies at his university. It was noted that he was especially applauded “by older members of the public”: “He praised the \textit{philosophes'} attack on fundamentalism, but has become himself a fundamentalist of the Enlightenment.” The journalist wrote that the historian did not appreciate the larger American capacity for self-criticism of its liberal tradition: “The Enlightenment's task was not the simple imposition of reason that Peter Gay keeps looking for—a matter psychologically unmixed like blind retention of one's superstitions. The real problem was to unite heart and head.”\textsuperscript{783} Although these last lines summarize Gay’s scholarly project, which was, apparently, not understood.

Gay’s own polemical stance sometimes drowned out the more subtle notes of his historical approach. He is one of the most difficult historians to quote, especially because he is so quotable. Yet we have seen that his “perspectival realism” in fact represented a more sophisticated defense of objectivity than critics often noticed, while it was the explicit embeddedness of his work in the liberal tradition that facilitated his endeavor to expand it. Moreover, he frequently supported similar causes of the New Left, albeit with different means. In 1977, he praised Yale’s president in the \textit{The New York Times}, because “he presided over the democratization of the undergraduate student body, the radical improvement in the graduate school, and the admission of women”\textsuperscript{784}. Freud inspired him in his adoption of some themes on the New Left’s agenda. His series on the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie examined sexuality, homosexuality, transvestism, prostitution, sadism, and false perceptions of womanhood—even though he did not mention women writers and scholars in his work on the bourgeoisie. In the early 1980s his historical approach seemed to heed Darnton’s suggestions to “get out of that armchair and into the archives”. He spent eight months in Germany to conduct research for his cultural history of the bourgeoisie. In some ways, he absorbed the program of the sixties, but with much mistrust of general trends and radicalism.

\textsuperscript{782} Novick, \textit{That Noble Dream}, 611.
However, the distinctions between American positivism and Gay’s campaign, which was shaped by his German-American perspective, were likely to get lost in scholars’ polarizations. A decade before, he himself had countered many American historians’ rigid notions of objectivity and appealed to Geistesgeschichte. Naturally, his work did not so much represent German culture, because many of the Weimar intellectuals who influenced him had, like Neumann and Cassirer, already developed or changed their views because of their confrontation with National Socialism and their emigration to the United States. He did not use Carl Jung, Heidegger and never became an avid reader of “romantic” poetry, but only relied on writers who had clearly stated their liberal intentions. Nevertheless, he did blur the distinctions with the ideological, irrational and European “other” in his work. His historical approach, increasingly infused by psychoanalysis, rewrote European history into a narrative that contradicted images of the “original” American character. He expanded the notion of western culture through re-establishing the ties with “Romantic” imagination and individuality, while his larger awareness of the dangers of cultural mythmaking than many American intellectuals averted a naiveté about irrational excess.

Gay’s reliance on émigré thought and references to distorted German traditions did not just point to German crimes, but also corresponded to a postwar transatlantic reality, in which American scholars interpreted many European ideas outside the context in which they were developed. While the transfer to the United States of German and émigré ideas was often flawed, and narratives of twentieth-century German history deeply polarized, he perceived it to be his task as a scholar to examine European ideas in the historical context to explain their origins to American intellectuals. It was paradoxically the liberal context that allowed him to use German intellectual and cultural traditions in ways closed to German historians after the Second World War. His fluency in the English language had put him in a position to process Geistesgeschichte's dynamics between cultural construction and historical complexity more successfully in his writings than many other émigré historians did. In this sense, American intellectual traditions formed a gateway to continue parts of German culture.

But towards the end of the 1960s Gay’s postwar-project to define American identity as part of a transatlantic dialectic was overlooked, or did not go far enough, in the eyes of social historians who
began to break up the alleged unity of American culture in minorities. He himself did not particularly consider it his task to campaign for minorities. His definition of freedom was in the end more individually defined, which inhibited his participation in mass movements—although he sometimes advocated similar goals as the student movement. In the 1990s, he noted that “the ideology of multiculturalism (which I must say I do not relish in its present, bellicose form) virtually dictates the attitude that the very idea of outsiderhood is a symptom of an impermissible narrowness of mind and must be banished”. Multiculturalism had become one of the left’s “pieties”, while Gay’s own position as outsider continued to be strongly tied to his position as responsible “insider”.

According to the historian, the full-fledged attacks on the United States in the 1960s only invited ideology and instability. Instead, he believed that a national identity, grounded in tradition and innovation, should generate both self-criticism and self-esteem: “Perhaps it was, as exceptionalists have claimed, typically ‘American’ of the founding generation to have been open to self-criticism and eager for experimentation, but it was also, I would insist, very Enlightened.” The “American man” was “new”, because this conviction shaped their endeavors and “impressed European visitors from the beginning.” Ultimately, though, American identity was a “paradox”, rooted in European tradition and innovative. Although this acknowledgement of European roots contradicted American exceptionalism, his repudiation of the protests even led to the historian’s refusal to protest against the war at the end of the decade. In 1966 the historian had signed an ad in *The New York Times* that condemned the military invasion in Vietnam, and urged the government to withdraw its troops. But when the protests against Vietnam became stronger, he stopped making public statements against the war. Although he and Hofstadter were of one mind with respect to the student protests, the Americanist combined his criticism of the students with action against the war in Vietnam. It was not fear that kept him from any activism, Gay emphasized: “I’ve been a citizen since 1946, so I was

785 Gay, “Letter to My Colleagues”.
786 Gay, “America the Paradoxical”, 853.
787 Idem., 854.
788 “Betty & I have been surprised not to find your name on any of the protest ads—even the mild ‘Negotiations’ one. We hope it doesn’t mean anything.” “Letter to Gay”, sender unknown, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2; Unprocessed.
entitled to do anything I wanted to do.” But the colleagues and friends with whom he had shared a
criticism of McCarthyism in the 1950s, parted ways here: “My closest friends were protesting against
bigotry in this country, and I thought that was fine. But I didn’t do anything of any importance […]
Hofstadter never asked me to come along. They were Americanists—it was essentially Americanist
historians who did this.” But during weekly meetings at the apartment of fellow Europeanist Stern,
Columbia scholars such as Hofstadter and Daniel Bell discussed writing a pamphlet against the war.

Gay’s defense of the Enlightenment did in fact resemble some of the loyalties of future neo-
conservatives. In 1960 Norman Podhoretz, an editor of Commentary, apparently liked one of his
articles about neo-conservatism: “I’ve been looking for a piece about this and if expanded your article
is it.” Yet it should be added that Gay’s relations with neo-conservatives have since the beginning of
the 1950s never been cordial. While in the 1940s he broke with Fabian socialism because of his
commitment to social change and the transatlantic relationship, he defied neo-conservatives’
unilateralist stance and disbelief in social change. His distance to the neo-conservative movement
was also illustrated by an incident in 1983. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick’s lecture as part of Jefferson Memorial
Lectures at Berkeley was disrupted by the public. Whereas Kirkpatrick had written her dissertation
with Franz Neumann, she had increasingly turned to the right in the decades to come to become a
Reagan supporter in the early eighties. After the incident Gay refused to sign “a petition to speak up
for academic freedom”, which compelled Sidney Hook to write him a letter: “Your thinking is typical
of the unreconstructed liberal”. Hook here referred to Gay’s ongoing belief that the largest danger
came from the right.

Still, during the crisis of the sixties the historian put the values of stability and reason before
the New Left’s mobilization of the masses to fight for more equality and democracy. A “conservative”
dimension, inspired by Freud, informed Gay’s work, as he admitted himself: “Professionals are

790 Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
791 “Letter of Norman Podhoretz to Gay”, 11 April 1960; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.1; Unprocessed. Unfortunately, it remains unclear what article Podhoretz is referring to. For Commentary, Gay has only written
one review, which was of Michel Foucault’s Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason (1 October 1965).
792 Gay’s belief in gradual change and “style” compelled him to vote for Hilary Clinton instead of
793 “Letter of Sidney Hook to Gay”, 19 April 1983; Peter Gay Papers; Box 8.2; Unprocessed.
conservative, at least about their profession. I know: I am a conservative myself. But there is much of value in the defense of professionalism in history today, when the disinterested passion for the past, which is one of the most fragile and humane values we still cherish, is under persistent attack by myth-makers, and by nihilists without memories.” This conservative dimension is also reflected by a project called “The Liberal Temper” that was still in its initial stages when I interviewed Gay in 2009.

Six or seven years earlier, he had signed a contract with Norton for a book about “the psychology of liberalism”. Combining history and psychoanalysis, the historian intended to argue that “liberalism is both politically and psychologically very valuable. I got interested in what good health mean for the psychoanalysts and politicians, and I gave some examples from the nineteenth century in British politics. There are some interesting historical facts about how people behave, about what people don’t like and whom they don’t like. I want to examine how to deal with ambiguity, insecurity and contradictory feelings.” When asked whether he didn’t consider it controversial to associate health with liberalism, he answered: “That is exactly why I didn’t do the book. You can see it sounds all pretty extreme. I’m afraid of that book.” He mentioned that he used his last book about Romanticism essentially to escape writing “The Liberal Temper”. He had given a talk about the idea of the book and had started to draft an outline, but that was all. The plan of the book does sound “extreme”. While his psychological approach initially included irrationality as part of human nature, it here more explicitly threatened to exclude the “unhealthy” outsider. Gay was aware of this danger, which ultimately kept him from writing this book. In Why Romanticism Matters, he re-emphasized his idea that this influential movement with its criticism of the Enlightenment. Similarly, his own thinking about the “liberal temper” should be understood as a reaction to the rise of National Socialism, not as a confirmation of American democracy.

Stern explained the difficulty of designating a meaningful middle-way between theory and reality, Germany and the United States, criticism and responsibility: “The chief victim, as always, has been the liberal middle, caught between a resurgent right and an extremist left. The process of polarization, as right and left help each other in the common struggle against the ‘liberal

794 “Notes to a lecture”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.1; Unprocessed.
795 Gay, “Course notes: The Theory of History”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 11; Unprocessed.
Establishment’, is already discernible and has prompted some people to invoke the frightening analogy of Weimar.”

In the complex undertaking of defining the liberal center, it might not be surprising that Gay always looked for the mentorship of American liberals like Hofstadter to help him navigating in his own, often controversial, construction of a German-American culture. After all, he put a much more ambivalent cultural style, instead of fixed ideas, at the center of his thinking, which fuelled his need for clear models to sustain his representation of the liberal middle. After Hofstadter’s death in 1955, the eminent historian of American racism and the South, C. Vann Woodward became his “friend and spiritual advisor”. Gay met Vann Woodward through Hofstadter, but they only became friends after he moved to Yale. Vann Woodward was the author of The Strange Career of Jim Crow, which argued that segregation was not an intrinsic part of American history, but a relatively recent phenomenon. At the end of the 1960s Vann Woodward, like Gay, was attacked by the radical Left and became a critic of the vogue of multiculturalism and liberal pietism. Although Gay did not share the other historian’s economic historical approach, Vann Woodward was a liberal with both leftist and conservative traits, as well. The Americanist reinforced his belief that a sense of western community and identity could be part of a political agenda that favored (gradual) social change.

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796 Stern, “Reflections on the Student Movement”, 133.
797 His long-standing conflict with Hofstadter’s wife Beatrice, which originated in a dinner party in 1966, deeply saddened Gay. Although he would remain close to Hofstadter, he would later note that this conflict formed one of the reasons that he decided to leave Columbia. Another important reason for his leave was Henry Robert’s move to Dartmouth College in 1968. Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
798 “Letter to Allan Mitchell”, 27 January 1986; Peter Gay Papers; Box 8.2; Unprocessed.
Chapter V:

Between Memory and History

Introduction:

Shortly after 1968, Gay moved from Columbia to Yale University in New Haven. The historian had accepted a post as a professor of Intellectual and Comparative History. At Yale, he seemed to escape some of the exhausting battles of the previous years. He was “pleased and astonished at the open faculty meetings and the president’s acquaintance with our work”.

At that time, Yale’s History department reflected much of the diversity of Gay’s own historical perspective. He reunited with the historian of the eighteenth century R.R. Palmer, who had first discussed a transatlantic approach to the Enlightenment with him in the 1950s. There were also some distinguished experts on German history, such as Henry A. Turner Jr. and Hans Gatzke. Gay became especially close to Turner, a former member of the OSS. At Yale he also developed his friendship to his “mentor” Vann Woodward. In 1977, Gay would take over this colleague’s chair as a Sterling Professor of History.

In New York, other critics of the New Left had cultivated more radical sentiments, such as the philosopher and journalist Irving Kristol. Kristol became one of the first neo-conservatives, alongside some of Gay’s former Columbia-colleagues like Daniel Bell and Nathan Glazer. These intellectuals paired their belief in a unilateral idea of American exceptionalism with a call for freedom and a tough stance against the “totalitarian” Soviet Union. On the other side of the spectrum intellectuals such as the philosopher Herbert Marcuse had moved closer to the protesting New Left. In the middle of these polarizations, Gay’s own search for the political center in American culture became accompanied by a growing attachment to Germany since the beginning of the 1960s. In 1961, he first returned to the country that he had escaped as a child more than twenty years before, much later than some other members of his generation of émigré historians like Mosse (in 1947) and Stern (in 1954). Only in the first half of the 1970s he would become a regular visitor to the country. In his memoirs My German

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Question: Growing up in Nazi Berlin (1997), he describes the difficulties of his confrontation with a people whose culture he only gradually and incompletely came to embrace. In due time, he did establish professional connections and friendships with some Germans. The historian even began to actively explore German-Jewish history, which resulted in the collection of essays Freud Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture (1978).

It seems tempting to attribute Gay's renewed bonds to Germany to a new phase in the processing of his own experiences with anti-Semitism that enabled him to explore the subject professionally. In his memoirs, Mosse explained his own move from the topic of English parliamentary history to German history through his further integration into American culture: “Nearly two decades had now passed since I had arrived in the US and there was no more need to immerse myself in a respectable Anglo-Saxon subject in order to distance myself from my past as outsider.”

The Nation detected a comparable change in Gay’s Weimar Culture: “A few years ago Peter Gay seemed to some of his admirers to be undeniably brilliant, swift of judgment, unkind in debate, impatient to prove the limits of other men and in particular the historians who were his teachers, colleagues, friends. His new book suggests a different kind of man, no less acute and decisive, but one who can experience pain as well as inflict it.” Had Gay indeed become “a different kind of man”, who was able to confront his own German past?

This chapter examines the tension between Gay’s writing of memory and history in his work up to the 1970s. It argues that his positions as a historian and émigré intensified each other, but also collided on many occasions. As has already been mentioned, his views on Germany in his work did not just become gradually more lenient, evolving in triumphant reunification. Lingering resentment also flared up when Gay began to take up a more public responsibility as eyewitness of German crimes after many older émigré intellectuals retired or passed on in the 1970s. But like most other German-American historians of his émigré generation he concentrated on German-Jewish history in the period before the Nazis came to power. Saul Friedländer wondered about American historians’

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801 Mosse, Confronting History, 142.
hesitation to deal with the period of the Third Reich. “I never understood why it took so long for the Leo Baeck Institute to deal with the Nazi period as such, 1933-1945, even though I understand that for German Jews that is not the main topic. Even the greatest historians coming from the German-Jewish background haven’t helped us in dealing with the darkest period.” These historians, Mosse and Stern among them, were unanimous in asserting that Hitler’s policies did not represent the whole truth about German attitudes toward Jews. Gay’s emphasis on German-Jewish symbiosis made some critics believe that the historian continued to escape his own past. A critic called his lifelong plea for American liberalism, the Enlightenment and the German-Jewish symbiosis a “second hard-won assimilation”.

This chapter probes the connections between Gay’s view on the German-Jewish symbiosis and his own experiences. It first explores the development of his attitudes towards the German-Jewish past after the 1960s in his support of the German-Jewish symbiosis and during his visits and contacts to his German colleagues. In the second part, it analyzes how the historian integrated his own, often conflicting memory of Nazi Germany and the United States in his self-perception of a Jewish German-American in his articles, memoirs and some unpublished accounts. This chapter argues that suggestions of a development from alleged conformism to a larger processing of his past, or an ongoing “assimilation”, are too straightforward to explain the relationship between Gay’s life and work. Instead, it claims that from the beginning of his career his historical writings deeply reflected his particular experience of emigration as German second-generation historian. His evolving understanding of the complexities of his past, together with his developing historical approach, increasingly allowed him to explain his defense of western culture though explicit connections between his own experiences and his work. Ultimately, his scholarship did not reflect a gradual return to Weimar culture, which he had not really experienced himself, but Weimar’s reinvention in the United States.

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803 Mosse has written the book *Towards the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York, 1978), which suggests a focus on the Holocaust, but mainly deals with its prehistory.
804 Saul Friedländer, “Speech”; George L. Mosse Collection; Box 3; Folder 16.
“Those Who Lived”

In his acceptance speech of the Geschwister Scholl-Preis, “Verstreut und Vergessen: Deutsche Juden im Exil”, Gay summed it up: at the end of January 1933, there were 500,000 Jews in Germany. After the war in May 1945, only 14,000, 3 % of the former population, were left. What happened to the other 97%? One third was murdered by the Nazis, the remainder went to England, Argentina, Palestine and the United States. Most of these émigrés, he noted, had gone out of sight. Not only because they were largely insignificant men and women, whose hardships remained relatively unknown, but also because of the ominous presence of the dead in the Holocaust. Gay, therefore, decided to concentrate on the the commonly overlooked survivors. In 1972, his new involvement was established by his position as fellow of the Leo Baeck institute in New York, which was founded to encourage research into the history and culture of German-speaking Jewry.

Only after writing Weimar Culture, Gay for the first time stayed in Germany for an extended period of time. In 1974, he and his wife Ruth were invited to stay in Munich as a guest of the university. Ruth was American-born, but she had displayed an active interest in her Jewish roots since the 1950s. She herself would become a distinguished historian of Jewish culture. After their stay in Germany, they would go on to Oxford, where Gay had obtained a one-year fellowship at Wolfson College. He and Ruth had agreed that at the first sign of anti-Semitism or discomfort “we would flee to Oxford”. This did not happen. They stayed until January investigating the history of German Jewry in Munich. Gay wrote to his mother (in English, as always) that he researched books about German art and looked in archives “for papers of certain musicians I’m interested in”, in preparation of Freud, Jews and Other Germans. Every day the Gays examined their discoveries together in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. To his publisher Gay even stated their intention to make a book out of their findings about German-Jewish history.

808 Gay, My German Question, 45.
809 “Letter to his mother”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 17.1.
Gay’s research into German-Jewish history did not intend to break with the Enlightenment and Weimar’s cultural achievements. In his essays, the historian explored the Jewish contribution to music, literature and art. During another research trip to Germany in the 1980s, he complained about the abundance of books on East-European Jewish life and the destruction of European Jews under Hitler: “It has been forgotten that there was any activity of real interest after 10 AD and before 1933 AA.”

Instead, he proposed: “I want, and I want us, to look beyond that, to recognize that we still need to know more about those who lived, not just about those who died.” In his own work, “death” mainly alluded to some morbid Weimar intellectuals’ fateful fetishism. Even Freud had overstated the impact of a death wish on man’s actions, as he noted in his biography of the psychoanalyst.

Gay’s research followed decades of underplaying the “Jewish” dimension of the past in his work. In his Bernstein biography, his neglect of the socialist’s Jewish background compelled Marianne E. Bernstein, the “sole surviving member of the Bernstein clan”, to write him in 1964: “I believe that it is my right and privilege to point to a ‘mistake’ I found. We do not belong (probably unfortunately) to the lower middle-class. Actually you only wrote, that Jacob Bernstein lived in a lower class section of town. We are all descendant from a rabbi in Padua, Italy, whose son was sent to Poland to study Hebrew.” In his dissertation, Gay refrained from elaborating on Bernstein’s Jewish background, while the historian was apparently a little too eager to enlist him into the ranks of the bourgeoisie. It is no surprise that he later considered this biography a first step towards reconciliation with the Germans, rather than an exploration of his own Jewish identity.

In the course of Gay’s historical career, there were more critical voices that questioned his disregard for German-Jewish history. When after his dissertation he returned to the research of German history in *Weimar Culture*, he claimed that Weimar was not a “Jewish” republic: “It was the largely untroubled cooperation of Jews and gentiles in their common pursuit of history that made out the success of the Weimar Republic.” One colleague wondered whether “you did purposely

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810 “Letter to Dr. Ernst-Peter Wieckenberg”, 22 April 1987; Peter Gay Papers; Box 3.2; Unprocessed.
813 “Letter of Marianne Bernstein to Gay”, 20 August 1964; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19; Unprocessed.
underplay the Jewish theme, i.e. the Jewish background of so many of your important figures?" Gay, however, remained hesitant to define “Jewish” culture and scholarship. He initially neglected Voltaire’s anti-Semitism in the first edition of Voltaire’s Politics in 1959. After the publication of Freud, Jews and Other Germans, his colleague Felix Gilbert wrote him a letter that with regard to the questions of modernism and Jewishness “it needs more emphasis that all great collections of modern art were brought together and in possession of people with a Jewish background”. Gay’s eagerness to point out the bourgeois side of German Jewry made him exclude intellectuals who were both avant-garde and radicals, like Gustav Landauer, Kurt Eisner or Ernst Toller. He tried to find a middle between philo-Semitism and anti-Semitism, but wasn’t this an all too convenient escape of the twentieth-century drama of German history that was now broadly discussed?

At the beginning of the 1960s, intellectuals’ debate became particularly heated when it took up the controversial role of European Jews in their own destruction. Hannah Arendt was the first to mention the complicity of the Jewish Councils in the Holocaust in her book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (1963), which had earlier that year been published in a series of articles in The New Yorker. Arendt’s claim that Jewish councils had facilitated their own extermination was interpreted by many as an “accusation” aimed at (German) Jews. Eichmann in Jerusalem attacked the popular myth of widespread Jewish resistance that was cultivated immediately after the war. In the media, the American expansion of power and wealth did not leave much room for a public discussion about concentration camps; journalists rather covered the successful American lives of survivors. Therefore, a broader American awareness of the Holocaust surfaced after decades of silence. Only during the Eichmann trial in 1961 did the label “Holocaust” gain currency; the European murder of the Jews was now for the first time presented to the American public as an “entity”. While Weimar’s intellectual traditions excited intellectuals in the sixties, the Holocaust came to captivate the larger American public in the 1970s, first through the television series The Holocaust, which was

816 “Letter of Walter Laqueur to Gay”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19; Unprocessed.
817 “Letter of Felix Gilbert to Gay”, 14 June 1978; Peter Gay Papers; Box 8.1; Unprocessed.
820 Idem., 133.
broadcasted in April 1978.\textsuperscript{821} Arendt’s book, therefore, epitomized a shift in public attention from German perpetrators to Jewish victims.\textsuperscript{822} Instead of heroic resisters, the Jews had gone passively (“like lambs”) to their deaths.

For a while, Arendt became “American Jewish Public Enemy Number One”.\textsuperscript{823} But although \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem} ignited the American public, both Raul Hilberg’s book \textit{The Destruction of European Jews} (1961) and Bruno Bettelheim’s \textit{Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age} (1960) pointed to passive Jewish attitudes towards Nazi persecution just before her book came out.\textsuperscript{824} In fact, Arendt had earlier vilified Hilberg (1926-2007) before taking over some of his main arguments. The Austrian-American historian became the first historian of his generation to research the Holocaust explicitly. Already in his Master’s thesis, he pointed to the participation of Jewish leaders in the German murder machinery. His book \textit{The Destruction of European Jews} became a monument of scholarship through its painstaking analysis of the role of German bureaucracy in the Holocaust.

The radically different scholarly focus of the émigré historians Gay and Hilberg is remarkable. In spite of Hilberg’s Austrian background, they shared important parts of their biographies. In 1939, Hilberg escaped from the Nazis, who had invaded Austria the year before. Like Gay, he first stayed at Cuba, after which he became an American citizen and scholar.\textsuperscript{825} At Columbia, they worked at the Department of Public Law and Government Columbia University at roughly the same time. Both fledgling scholars even had the same dissertation supervisor, Franz Neumann. While Hilberg and Gay were mainly educated as political scientists, they both took a historical approach in their work–albeit a very different one. In 1956, Gay, together with Hilberg and some of Neumann’s other students, prepared a volume of essays after the death of their mentor.\textsuperscript{826} In a letter to Gay in the 1970s, Hilberg agreed that they shared many experiences and “like you I spent my academic life with the topic of the

\textsuperscript{821} Mausbach, “America’s Vietnam in Germany–Germany in America’s Vietnam”, 64.
\textsuperscript{822} Novick, 137.
\textsuperscript{823} Idem., 134.
\textsuperscript{824} Idem., 139. Arendt actually disagreed with Bettelheim’s premises that the Jews had failed to resist because of “ghetto thinking”, with the argument that all people reacted similar in such circumstances.
\textsuperscript{825} Scholars have largely neglected to research the relationship between Hilberg’s historical writings and life. The other students were Herbert A. Deane, Martin Fleisher, Julian H. Franklin and Norman Rosenberg.
Germans". Although the tone of these letters was cordial enough, Gay did not refer to the other historian in his memoirs or in his historical writings (nor did Hilberg refer to Gay). In Gay’s personal papers, no letters from Hilberg are preserved. When directly asked about their relationship, Gay mentioned that the other historian “did not hang out with people like me”.

Obviously, both scholars clashed on the subject of the German past, something that came to a head in 1976. Gay had just published his two articles “Thinking about the Germans I” and “Thinking about the Germans II” in The New York Times about his reconnection to Germany and the Germans. In these articles, he states his surprise about Americans’ ongoing “unease” about German crimes. Although they had never personally experienced the concentration camps, this sentiment prevented them from travelling to Germany. It refrained them from buying German products and “smile cynically at professions of a Germany reformed”. He noted that he did not want to trivialize German crimes, but stated that the Germans had in fact much improved. They were among Israel’s most committed supporters, they had acknowledged their ultimate responsibility for the atrocities and offered restitution to the survivors of the Holocaust. Yet “West German efforts have not had the press they deserve”. The threat to “constitutional government and public decency” in West Germany does not come from the “totalitarian Right but the totalitarian Left”. Therefore, Americans should abandon rigid views on a German Sonderweg; the Bonhoeffers, who were part of the German resistance were “anti-Nazi martyrs”, defied generalizations about “the German”; “Incredible as liberals and democrats may find the idea, West Germany wants what we want; its values are ours. But it will never be as effective as it might be, and may have to be, as long as the world dramatizes the German as a movie villain a snarling, sadistic butcher in white gloves, or a bespectacled pedant stained with blood.”

After reading Gay’s articles, Hilberg responded by sending Gay an article of his own about the participation of many thousand Germans in the Holocaust in an envelope, which was accompanied by

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827 “Letter of Raul Hilberg to Gay”, date unknown; Raul Hilberg Papers; Rg. 074.005; Carton 8; Folder 20; University of Vermont Archives.
828 Interview with the author, 23 March 2009.
a short note: “Thinking about the Germans III”. Gay wrote back that he would have preferred to receive a more detailed comment on his articles. Hilberg responded that he seldom wrote letters, “and in this case especially, I would not have known where to begin. How does one write about feelings?” He told Gay that he read his last article about the Germans after his return from a particularly depressing trip to Germany:

“For example, I was approached by a police sergeant to sign a petition affirming the Munich agreement; I was treated to a performance of the Nazi motion picture Jud Süss and then read the 1976 version by Fassbinder Müll, Stadt, und Tod in my hotel. [...] And when I came home, somewhat depressed, I found your current thinking about the Germans in The New York Times. That is when I placed the paper in a manila envelope and addressed it to you, not in a spirit of irony, and not as a reminder either, but to suggest an additional thought. I did it, because you had written for a million readers and because it seemed to me that these readers, who see less and forget more than we do, should have been told more explicitly that there are limits, not only to a concept of two Germanies, east and west, but also to the idea of two Germanies, then and now.”

Their experiences in the Third Reich frequently threatened to suffocate both historians, but, apparently, they processed this overflowing of the past rather differently. Gay’s answer to Hilberg is significant: “My own summer experience in Germany was much more fortunate than yours. Among other people I last year ran across an old friend who had risked everything to save my father and to help myself and my parents to get out of Germany. [...] I agree of course that the Fassbinder story is absolutely disgusting. One sometimes wonders at the obtuseness of human beings!”

**German-Jewish Symbiosis**

Gay never attacked Hilberg, or Arendt, publicly. He did not intend to correct views on the Holocaust, but thought that these scholars did not tell the whole story. Above all, he criticized an overly exclusive

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831 “Letter of Raul Hilberg to Gay”, 4 oktober 1976; Raul Hilberg Papers; Rg. 074.005; Carton 8; Folder 20; University of Vermont Archives.
832 Unlike Gay, the Austrian historian of East-European decent was less able to identify with German cultural achievements.
833 “Letter to Raul Hilberg”, 19 oktober 1976; Raul Hilberg Papers; Carton 8; Folder 20.
approach to the German past from the perspective of the Nazi period. In *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, he went against the exclusive association of German Jewry with victimhood and passivity. “Ihr kennt die Juden nur als Opfer”, he told his German public during a lecture. In *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, he denied that Jewish attempts to integrate into German society were the product of cowardice, a fear of losing their possessions or outright naivety. Unsurprisingly, his defense of the German-Jewish symbiosis was disputed by many other Jews, such as the liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin, with whom relations were otherwise pleasant. In 1977, Berlin explained his criticism of Gay’s stance:

“I do not think the liberal solution necessarily fails – assimilation is obviously genuinely possible but not of the kind in which the official Berlin Jewish community believed– that one could be accepted as a German by Germans merely distinct from the majority in the matter of religion; the reason for this is plainly historical, namely that Jews neither are, nor are thought of, only as yet another religious group: their historical experience, if nothing else, has made of them a group not easily classified in any of the normal categories: even if talk of race is nonsense, their neighbors feel them to be distinct in all kinds of ways–their habits, their attitudes, their looks, their self-consciousness, etc., etc., etc., which makes them very different from, say, Huguenot groups in England, who found assimilation perfectly easy.”

Gay admitted that critics of the German-Jewish symbiosis such as Berlin, together with the Jewish philosopher Gershem Sholem, were partly right; the “cherished dream of symbiosis” was too blind to German anti-Semitism, for example in the work of Richard Wagner. Other, more mistrustful Jews founded defense organizations of German Jews in the 1890s. Nevertheless, in *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* he claimed that an examination of German Jews’ own perspective revealed a very different picture: many Jews sincerely believed that they were Germans–even though many “gentiles” differed: “As Freud has taught us to recognize, fantasies too are realities of a sort; they mirror men’s aspirations even if they distort their real situations.” This argument reflects Gay’s “perspectival realism”:

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834 Gay, “Lecture”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 11.
although Jews’ views were limited, they still reflected a part of historical reality that others might have overlooked. By 1888, German Jews could look back to a century of emancipation that was part of a general rise of the middle classes: “Jewish liberation seemed logical, and promised to be lasting, because it came in the guise of human liberation.”837 From the perspective of Weimar’s Jews perceptions of German-Jewish symbiosis did not appear so unrealistic, since they had experienced “a century of improvement, economic integration seemed to flourish, and Jews found themselves guardians of German culture […] After all it was the better of the two Germany’s that these Jewish Germans embodied in their lives and their own convictions, and the outcome, 1933, was not god-given, not inevitable, not predictable.”838 Similar to his work on the Enlightenment, he used the level of perception to nuance prevailing historiography and open up the past. Also on a more general level, the historian argued that Jews were much more German than was often thought; their attempts to shed their religious ties were part of a broader tendency to break away from a religious past: “The flight from tradition was not cowardly evasion but a flight into humanity—a flight they undertook in the company of many non-Jews.”839 Marriages and friendships between Jews and non-Jews, and baptism, were increasing. In the 1920s, Weimar was the first German state that provided Jews with political elbow room. The German-Jewish symbiosis implied that Jews could become the caretaker of German culture in a time when its better half surrendered to madness: “Germany’s Jews found it so gratifying to be guardians of German culture in part because they did not know all the subterranean sources of ill-will against them.”840 While others have argued that this “madness” was part of German culture, many Jews believed otherwise.

Accordingly, Gay perceives German-Jews as a “metaphor” in his research of the two main themes of his essays, German culture and Modernism:

839 Ibidem.
840 Gay, “Encounter with Modernism”, 111.
“These essays exhibit the convergence of two interests that have dominated my thinking and my research for quite some time: German culture and the Modernist Movement. The German Jew unites in himself these two interests in a kind of tragic completeness: he is at once German and Modern, a symbol, to himself, to his admirers and detractors alike, for the profound, often traumatic changes that made Western culture what it is today; he is a metaphor for modernity.”

None of Germany’s true painters such as Franz Marc and Paul Klee were Jewish. The first three essays of *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* (on Freud, Jews in Wilhelminian Germany and the so-called Berlin-Jewish spirit) claim that modernism should not be related to anti-rationalism, alienation and experimentalism. His essays about Brahms and the Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick show that modernism was not simply a polarity of isolated intellectuals opposed to complacent bourgeois, a suggestion that resurfaced in the American 1960s. Anticipating his works on the bourgeoisie, Gay wanted to draw attention to the deep roots of radical ideas and avant-garde art, which largely pervaded European culture from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, in the thinking of nineteenth-century middle-class thinkers and writers. In his review of the volume, Mosse noted that Gay destroyed the American myth of the German-Jewish intellectuals. While these intellectuals living in Vienna, Wilhelminian Germany or in the Weimar Republic became models for some of the radicals of the 1960s, they were, according to Mosse, actually symbols for these young Americans’ feelings about the United States.

**The Psychology of Anti-Semitism**

Gay’s support of the German-Jewish symbiosis remarkably entailed his probing of the general psychological mechanisms of anti-Semitism. This psychological approach took his effort to blur the borders between Germans and Jews one step further. In *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, he claims that German anti-Semitism was a way of confronting, “or, rather, not confronting”, the pressures of contemporary life, like industrialization, specialization and mechanization: “Anti-Semitism was, in

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short, an irrational protest against the modern world.” He explains that it was a more diverse
phenomenon than is often understood. It is “a cluster of behavior under a single name”: “The intensity,
rhythm, and outcome of the malady varied from individual to individual.”843 The innate complexity of
human nature even allowed for the existence of contradictory “clusters of ideas” in the same person.
Referring to Mosse’s essay about the German bestseller-author Gustav Freytag, he refused “to single
out one strand –the anti- or the philo-Semitic strand– as constituting the ‘real’ Freytag, Fontane, or
Nietzsche; each of them, like most other Germans, was made up of both”.844 Both anti-Semitism and
philo-Semitism, Gay believed, were ordering polarities that sustained each other like any other form of
radicalism: “It is sheer anti-Semitic tendentiousness, or Philo-Semitic parochialism, to canvass the
great phenomenon of Modernism from the vantage point of the Jewish question.”845

His psychological approach to anti-Semitism sheds a rather controversial light on the German-
Jewish symbiosis. It was a result of Jews’ acculturation into the wider German culture that many of
them adopted Jewish stereotypes, because they feared that Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe would
stir up German anti-Semitism. Therefore, their dislike of Ostjuden “was the product of ambivalence:
uneasiness with Germanness on the one hand, identification with Germans on the other hand”.846
According to him, this clash between German and Eastern European Jews continued to have an effect
on intellectuals such as Scholem’s rejection of the German-Jewish symbiosis.

Gay shared his perspective on German-Jewish history with other German-American second-
generation historians, although each of them approached the German-Jewish symbiosis differently and
at various stages of his career. Stern also refuted a perspective that centered around the Holocaust:
“After the Holocaust, people started to think that all criticism of Jews, past or present, was anti-
Semitic, and that all anti-Semitism had prepared the way for the final tragedy.”847 Similarly, Gay noted
that anti-Semitism did not catch the essence of Voltaire’s thinking in a new appendix to the second

844 Ibidem.
847 Fritz Stern, Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder and the Building of the German Empire (New
York, 1977) xi. Stern, Gold and Iron, 496. Stern claims that this neglect only reinforced the assumption
of German historians that “the great chancellor was not influenced by modern deformities, such as
money and journalism.” Ibidem., 263.
edition of Voltaire’s Politics. He now admitted that it was hard to ignore this controversial aspect of the philosophe’s thinking completely: “It is not anachronistic to find Voltaire’s anti-Jewishness disturbing and disappointing.” After all, contemporary thinkers such as Montesquieu and Lessing had not shared Voltaire’s prejudice. Still, Gay emphasized that an exposé of Voltaire’s anti-Semitism threatened to reduce his substance; the philosophe’s dislike for the Jews was rooted in his hatred for Christianity, a sentiment that was “far stronger, far more vehement and far more consequential than his anti-Semitism”. His approach to Voltaire is echoed by Stern’s views on Jacob Burckhardt; the German historian’s anti-Semitism was “gentle” compared with what would later come. It had “no essential bearing on the cultural historian’s thoughts.”

But while Gay used a psychological approach to bridge the differences between Germans and Jews, he thought Stern’s examination of the relationship between Bismarck and his Jewish chancellor Gershem Bleichröder too much of a conformation of Jewish stereotypes. In 1979, he wrote to the Princeton historian Felix Gilbert that his colleague had overestimated Stern’s recently published Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder and the Building of the German Empire (1977): “What really troubles me about the book is and makes it less useful than it should be, is Fritz’s attempt to take Bleichröder, the richest and most unusual Jew in Germany, as somehow typical. I do not wish to blink the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the early 1890s; perhaps my own writing on the subjects has been a little bland and perhaps denying some obvious things. I do not think so, but it is just barely possible.” Being a Jew himself, Stern thought that he was in the position to examine a controversial past that would otherwise be repressed, or resurfaced in the hands of less sympathetic historians, but Gay believed that he had overdone it: “I know that Fritz is very interested in the drama, and even the melodrama of history. But here the melodrama really obscures the myriad kinds of adjustments that the Jews in Germany made in the middle of the 19th century and right down to World War One.”

848 Gay, Voltaire’s Politics, 32.
849 Stern quotes in Gossman, “Jacob Burckhardt: Cold War Liberal?”, 553.
850 “Letter to Felix Gilbert”, 17 January 1979; Peter Gay Papers; Box 4.2; Unprocessed.
851 Ibidem.
Gay rejected Mosse larger emphasis on the role of anti-Semitic stereotypes in German history, as well. Mosse had started to research German-Jewish history much more as a specific field with its own cultural dynamics. Gay, however, expressed his sincere doubts about the other historian’s mental equilibrium: Mosse’s “somber assertion” does not do justice to a “phenomenon only apparently monolithic and one-dimensional”. According to Gay, he wrongly detected a German anti-Semitic tradition that ran from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century anti-Semitism was completely different from the twentieth-century variety: “Jewish assimilation, and resistance to it were, after all, only two elements, and scarcely the most important, in the revolutions that Germany experienced in the second half of the nineteenth century.” In a review of *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* Mosse countered that Gay examined German-Jewish history too exclusively within the psychological domain, which was insufficient to explain the “fragile nature of the symbiosis”. Mosse was not sure that German Jews considered themselves Germans: “The problem of what remained Jewish about such Jews cannot be answered by attacking the myth of their alienation or avant-garde leadership. It turns out to be more complicated than that.” Gay’s psychology taught him about Jewish identification with the aggressor, but not “why anti-Semitism turned out to be cancer”. According to Mosse, Gay’s hesitance to define a more specific identity formed one of the weaknesses of Gay’s collection of essays. Only in the case of Berlin did Gay define a “Jewish” element, because it was an intrinsic part of the city’s self-definition “and may thus claim a certain reality”. In his volume of essays Gay touches upon Mosse’s thesis of the peril of normality: when stereotypes form traditions, their ordinary character betrays their lethal force. He recognized that anti-Semitism

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852 Mosse had examined German-Jewish history since the end of the 1950s. Already in *The Crisis of German Ideology*, he defines National Socialism as an “anti-Jewish revolution” (p. 294). On April 22, 1970, Gay wrote Mosse a letter to compliment him with his book *Germans and Jews: The Right, The Left, and the Search for a “Third Force” in Pre-Nazi Germany* (New York, 1970), which Mosse had sent to him. Gay thought the articles in Mosse’s volume “quite splendid” and perceived the book as an “enormously suggestive and informative collection of essays which will be of particular importance to me as I proceed with my work on modern German history.” “Letter to George Mosse”, 22 April 1970; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2.


854 Idem., 14-5.


856 Idem., 40.


became part of daily life only at the end of the nineteenth century: “Familiarity is not always a good thing: often it impedes, with its very forcefulness, objective inquiry into what may be a myth.”

Moreover, he even suggested that the solution for contemporary German anti-Semitism lies for an important part in a normalization of German-Jewish relations. True to his dialectic view, he aimed to construct a past that highlighted those elements that diminished contemporary polarizations. As always, this is put in dialectical terms: the inclusion of the Jewish minority into German culture would make Germany more “European”. Again, Gay’s idea of western culture stirred interactions between the “outsider” and the “insider”. “Modernism” could serve as the key concept for integration, because it was both associated with perceptions of Jewish, German and European culture. In his acceptance speech of the Geschwister Scholl-Preis, awarded to people who furthered German consciousness about their own past, he affirmed that the relations between Jews and Germans needed much further “normalization”. The Scholls’ references to the “Jewish question” in their pamphlets were “not a happy choice”: it was actually a German question that confronted “non-Jewish Germans towards the activities of a minority that had been freed of demeaning laws only a few decades before, who took up professions in domains that had hitherto been free of Jews”.

In spite of the criticism he received, Gay’s idea of German-Jewish symbiosis resonated with many fellow Germans and Jews after the war. His focus on the achievements of German Jewry mirrored the self-assurance of what Mosse has called the “new Jew”, the young Israeli whose search for a new Jewish identity could not be singularly built on the memory of the Holocaust. Only in German Jews Beyond Judaism (1983) did Mosse explicitly hold up a German-Jewish tradition of Bildung to identify with. In 1998, he wrote Gay about his belief in the German-Jewish symbiosis: “I do not have to tell you that I agree with you as well in what you write about Sholem. I knew him very well, but the stubborn denial of the German Jewish dialogue on any level was part of his Zionist

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860 Gay, “Verstreut und Vergessen”.
862 Mosse, German Jews Beyond Judaism (Jerusalem, 1983) 249.
nationalism. No reasoned argument could intrude here. The Israeli historian Amos Elon confirmed second-generation German-American historians’ significance in his book *The Pity of it All. A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch 1743-1933* (2002): “My thinking about German Jews before the rise of Nazism was primarily affected by the insights of three great historians far more expert than I: Peter Gay, Fritz Stern, and my friend of many years, George Mosse, to whose memory I dedicate this book.”

**Gay in Israel**

Gay’s views on the German-Jewish symbiosis, however, did not imply his uncomplicated relations with both Israel and Germany after the war. Although he had discovered his Jewishness only in the Third Reich, his ties to Israel were undoubtedly present. The diaspora had placed one brother of his father in the country, whose son came to work for the Knesset. In 1978, Gay wrote to Mosse, who had become a frequent visitor, that he had had the chance to go to Israel on brief stints but that he had always turned them down. He did express the wish to go there and teach for a month or three “to get to know the country.” But it would take the historian another five years to find enough reason for a visit. When Gay finally came to spend some time in Israel in 1983, he frequently felt uncomfortable. A walk in the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv elicited his remark that “it was solely designed to make a point that Israel is home”, and that “those who have failed to choose Israel have chosen wrong”. His encounter with his Israeli relatives didn’t help his rapprochement. During the Gays’ visit, his cousin

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863 “Letter of George Mosse to Gay”, 31 October 1998; Peter Gay Papers; Box 22.
865 Mosse’s first visit to Israel had already taken place in 1951 and since 1969 he returned to Jerusalem every two years. Since 1981, he has taught every other semester at the Hebrew University until his retirement. The historian himself was hesitant at first to establish connections to Israel, but eventually obtained a professorship at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he has spent half of each year since the 1970s. His friend Georg Lichtheim, whom he had met at the University of Iowa, introduced him to a group of intellectuals, mainly of German origin in 1961: Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, Georg Landauer, Hans Kohn, Robert Weltsch, Jacob Talmon, Shmuel Samburski, Moshe Zimmerman, and others. Mosse was invited to teach at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, where he taught classes on the history of anti-Semitism and racism in 1979 as member of the Department Koebner chair in German history. Notwithstanding his larger integration into Israeli society, he refused to teach in Hebrew. Stern went to Israel first in 1971, when his friend and student Jay Winter was teaching in Jerusalem. Like Mosse and Gay, he noticed that during his trip “a complicated sense of identification with Israel grew in me”, a country of “refuge and hope”. Stern, *Five Germany’s I Have Known*, 283.
866 “Letter to Mosse”, 3 January 1978; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2.
867 Gay, “At home in Germany”, 33.
Norbert made some disparaging remarks about the Palestinians, which “spoiled Israel for me”\(^{868}\). He would never visit the country again. In 1988, he wrote a furious letter to the *Jerusalem Post*, which had referred to him as “Pessach Freilich” in a review of *Freud for Historians*\(^{869}\). Even in his memoirs, published almost sixty years after his escape, his stance towards his Jewish background remains ambivalent:

“I recall now, in November 1983, when J. had lunch in Haifa with A.B. Jehoshua, the novelist and critic, he asked me with characteristic Israeli directness – we had not met before – ‘Tell me, when you hear the word ‘Israel’ on the radio, do you turn up the sound?’ I thought it was a good question; fifty years earlier, I would have had no hesitation saying that I would leave the volume control of my radio untouched. Of course, there was no Israel then – another legacy of the Nazi years then barely imagined, and only by a few.”\(^{870}\)

Ruth Gay, who had Galician ancestors, took a different position towards her Jewish roots, and did return to Israel. When she met up with Israeli friends during their trip, they discussed “Peter’s attitude towards Jews and Judaism”: “They were maintaining that Peter was more Jewish than he knew & Jackie maintaining that one could probably analyze Peter’s work & find a Jewish element to the thinking. Jackie said that he had once tried to raise this question – more generally – whether there was a Jewish way of thinking, which Peter quite firmly rejected.”\(^{871}\) Her diary of their visit to Israel disclosed the many, more general complexities of American Jews to Israel: “Immensely irritated by indecent smoking behavior of two Israelis and also by earlier pushing to get on board of the plane. The Chassidim, it seems, are the most visible in their lawlessness. I was surprised at the strength of my revulsion against this behavior. I suppose because they are ‘my people’. I want to admire them and can’t just shrug it off as when Germans push on line 1.” Of course, she adds, this “Israeli rudeness” did not have something to do with a nature of a culture. But she dismissed “the kitsch of American-Jewish piety” for whom a strong relationship to the country almost took the form of a religion.

\(^{868}\) Interview with the author, 10 May 2008.
\(^{869}\) “Letter of Avner Falk to Gay”, 28 September 1988; Peter Gay Papers; Box 8.2.
\(^{870}\) Gay, “Six Years”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1.
\(^{871}\) “Journal of Ruth Gay during a trip to Israel”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19.
In spite of her own ambivalence, Gay later mentioned that his wife taught him a lot about Jewish history that his parents had not taught him. She had a very “practical attitude”, and eventually softened his attitude towards the “drei-Tagen-Juden”, referring to his mother’s family that only went to the synagogue on certain special days. Ruth Gay gave him ideas “how that worked in people’s mind”. She had more sympathy and provided him with an idea of what it meant to be “Jewish”: “I did not change ideas, but became less hostile about these people.” Her research of Jewish history, mainly in Germany, was a way of “recapturing her childhood”, but for Gay this did not diminish the distance he felt to his Jewish background. In 1985, he declined an invitation of the German historian Thomas Nipperdey to teach a course on German-Jewish history: “I am not in any real sense a Jewish historian. It is quite true that I have written a couple of articles on German-Jewish history, and I am by no means uninterested in the matter. But my real interest is cultural history of Europe in the nineteenth century as psychoanalysis.” Gay then proposes his own subject for a course: Freud. If he was a “Jewish historian”, he was one of a very particular kind.

Visits to Germany

More than two decades before Gay visited Israel, he returned to the country that had expelled him. But his first trip to Germany in 1961 was long-delayed and painful. He had returned to Europe three times before: in 1950 he stayed in Amsterdam to do research on his dissertation and in 1955 and 1958 he visited archives and friends in England and travelled in France and Italy. At those occasions, he claims not to have considered visiting Germany. In 1961 the Gays accepted an invitation of his Columbia-colleague Henry Hatfield to hear him lecture about Thomas Mann at the Free University in West Berlin. What was it that made his trip to the country seem suddenly possible? Not the talk by a colleague he could have heard lecturing in New York, about an author he might have liked better than Mann. Yet at the beginning of the 1960s, the Eichmann trial and rising public debate about the Holocaust in the United States demanded a more explicit processing of his relationship to Germany.

872 Interview with the author, 10 May 2008.
873 “Letter to Thomas Nipperdey”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 3.2.
The Gays first spent a few weeks in France, after which they intended to go to Berlin. As soon as they crossed the border, however, they started to doubt their decision. Gay bought marks for dollars from a young lady clerk who “looked at me coldly, her eyes registering pure hatred as I handed her my passport. A glance at her had left no doubt in my mind: murderous anti-Semitism was alive and flourishing in my native land.”

In his memoirs, he admits that nothing actually happened there. The encounter just brought out a reservoir of mistrust and hatred. During another stop in Munich to visit a colleague, the Gays were taken to a beer hall crowded with fraternity men. When they started to sing their student songs, they got up and left. In the end, they did reach Berlin. But Gay did not experience the “madeleine” moment he expected. Initially, the places of his youth merely lay bare a “numbness” to the memory of his past. His American identity, which “made him feel a little bit taller”, protected him only a little from the slow, complex and partial resurrection of his German past.

In due time, Gay’s repeated visits impinged on his views on Germany and the Germans. After the strains of his first return, he had not visited Germany “for three or four years, but after that began to visit the country until it became something of a habit”. This habit was mostly the result of his encounter with the historian Karl Dietrich Bracher and his wife. He first met the Brachers at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University in Palo Alto. In the postwar period, the United States and England formed neutral territory for encounters between German and émigré historians, who refused to cross the German border. Most importantly, Gay’s meeting with Bracher compelled him to cross a mental border: They “let him break out of fixed pattern of response to his native land”. He experienced his acquaintance with Bracher and his wife to be life-changing: “In 1963-4 much fell finally into place.” In Palo Alto, Bracher told him about his moral reeducation in American captivity. The German historian taught him that Germans were in fact able to improve themselves with, of course, a little help from the United States. In 1997, after the publication of Gay’s memoirs, the German historian referred to the historical significance of their friendship:

874 Gay, My German Question, 5.
875 Idem., 198.
876 Idem., 196.

Bracher’s “experience with American democracy, intensified by postwar studies at Harvard and coupled with his distaste for totalitarianism, determined the direction he would take as historian” \textsuperscript{879}

Gay’s meeting of Bracher’s wife Dorothee was perhaps of even greater significance. She was a relative of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was connected to the German resistance that planned the attacks on Hitler on July 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1944. In his memoirs, Gay realized the simplicity of his astonishment that she had lost more family members than he during the war. Not that the German war suffering was news to him: “I must have been ready to listen.”\textsuperscript{880} So at the beginning of the 1960s, he began to open up to the German experiences during the war. In 1978, he dedicated \textit{Freud, Jews and Other Germans} to the Brachers and another couple whose friendship he came to cherish, the historian Wolfram Fischer and his wife Elizabeth: “In friendship; for changing me by being themselves.” These friends and colleagues presented him their “German Question”. In the 1950s, he bought his German books in England, but in the 1960s he ordered the seven parts of the collected works of Heinrich Heine in Marburg.

In the course of the 1960s, a mutual rejection of the student protests further attached Gay to some of his German colleagues. Earlier, the concept of western culture compelled him to include Germany. At the end of the 1960s, however, both countries were connected in more apprehensive tones. The international student movement proved that the whole western world was under attack. It confirmed that irrational mass movements could arise not only in Germany, but everywhere. After

\textsuperscript{878} “Letter of Karl Dietrich Bracher to Gay”, 24 January 1999; Peter Gay Papers; Box 22.
\textsuperscript{879} Gay, \textit{My German Question}, 197.
\textsuperscript{880} Idem., 198.
leaving Columbia’s polarizations, in Germany the clashes between “embittered anti-radical professors” and Marxist hardliners continued to divide German universities in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{881} We have seen that his views on the significance of German history isolated him from many American students and colleagues, but he was attached to a liberal German historian like Bracher through their shared feelings of panic and mistrust. A deep concern with the German past and the Second World War became more binding than German-American borders. The historian encountered a new generation of German, mainly social historians that took over German historical scholarship, among whom Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka and Gerhard A. Ritter.

After writing \textit{Weimar Culture}, Gay’s inclusion of German culture into a concept of the West progressed further. His first longer stay in Germany in 1974, together with his wife, materialized the complexities of the German past in new, forceful ways. In the report of the Gays’ three-month stay in Munich, “Musings in Munich”, they admitted that the city was far from perfect. It had after all been the headquarters of the Nazi movement. During their stay, they observed that Hitler’s name rarely appeared: people spoke of the “Third Reich” with heavy, ironic quotation marks, or of “die NS-Zeit”. They found out that some of Göring’s belongings were to be auctioned. Yet they denied the existence of a “conspiracy of silence” about the National Socialist past: the nearby concentration camp at Dachau had a memorial, anti-Semitism was illegal and barely visible: “More than one Jewish resident in Munich told us: Germany is the least anti-Semitic country of the world [...] these testimonies carry more weight [...] We have met, not only the children of Nazi butchers but also those of their victims. Our German friends are too discreet to make anything of it, but the Nazis did not murder Jews alone.”\textsuperscript{882} Earlier, Gay had denounced Neumann’s reference to Germany as “the least anti-Semitic country of the world”. Now, almost thirty years later, he turned out to be more receptive.

The dialectical portrayal of \textit{Weimar Culture} is in “Musings in Munich” replaced by a more traditional opposition between a “cultural” Europe and a “democratic” United States. The Gays even proceeded to tell Americans publicly about the accomplishments of German culture: “The American

\textsuperscript{881} “Letter of Quentin Skinner to Gay”, 16 January 1975; Peter Gay Papers; Box 2.2.
visitor to Munich finds himself compelled to make comparisons to American culture, most of them invidious.” Their lecture was especially harsh about American city-planning: “Our walks around Munich have convinced us that urban life need not be the nightmare it is at home.” The Gays seemed textbook conservatives, when they noted that in Munich they had “been reminded of something we thought irrevocably lost. [...] In America, a few shrinking islands of urbnity apart, city dwellers have become the servants of the massive Moloch they call Cleveland, Los Angeles, or New York. Here in Europe, in Munich more than elsewhere, the old and proper relationship has been preserved—or, rather, painstakingly restored: the city serves its inhabitants.”

Public criticism of an aspect of the modernity that Gay had always defended now became possible, which even involved the impact of migration: “If the old houses have remained intact, they are inhabited now by new nationalities, new generations, too new to create in more than the most rudimentary fashion that sense of coherence and belonging in one's immediate surroundings that make a city safe, clean, and, above all, interesting.”

After this first extended stay in Germany, Gay’s visits to the country multiplied. His renewed contact with his father’s early friend Emil Busse increased even more intimate ties. During a visit to Berlin, he decided to look for Busse, whom the Gays had lost contact with after their emigration. Busse had shipped back the silver that they had left him before their emigration as soon as he had tracked them down after the war. But apparently Gay had first not been inclined to pursue this contact. In 1975, he wrote excited to his mother that after thirty-five years he had seen Busse again, who was now sixty-seven. He had just looked him up in a telephone book.

During their meeting, Busse told him about his own struggles to stay out of the German army during the war, and both men continued to talk for days. His contact with Busse signified a new stage of his rapprochement to the Germans, after his initial meetings with German émigrés and Germans on liberal soil. He had now found someone to enlighten his individual German past. As no other, Busse provided evidence of his support of the German-Jewish symbiosis: German-Jewish friendships were indeed possible. During a next visit to Germany, he wrote to his wife about his growing comfort in Germany: “It’s good to have reentered the complexities of the German cultural scene: I read the

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883 Ruth and Peter Gay, “Musings in Munich”, 42.
Süddeutsche every day to keep informed. And I have started to read the New German translation of Ulysses.”

He even attended a soccer game in the Olympia Stadium, in which he had watched the Olympics with his father in 1936. With Busse he went to see his father’s old club Hertha BSC play. Gay later dedicated his memoirs to this German.

The Bundesrepublik had become, or so Gay claimed, a “normal country”: “West Germany has become a stabilizing economic, political and cultural element in a threatened, precarious Western community, precisely when the United States is retreating from service as the world’s policeman, the Soviet Union remains militant, and the totalitarian German ‘Democratic’ Republic remains entrenched.”

During the mounting Cold War, West Germany had become a significant line of defense against communism. Gay, who had refused to read German books just after his emigration, lectured in German at the University of Munich in 1975. All his activity on German territory fuelled his reputation of a German historian in the United States. He was invited to give lectures at congresses and symposia on German history in both countries. He and Bracher helped each other to make their historical work known at the other side of the Atlantic by writing prefaces to one another’s books and connecting them to colleagues. At Yale, his work on German and German-Jewish history attracted many interested students. In 1990 he set out for a lecture series about Goethe, together with his Yale-colleague and literary historian Cyrus Hamlin, because he wanted “to put this great figure back on the map of American students”. After one of these lectures, he wrote to a friend: “German really is now my second language!”

Even in the 1990s, Gay’s processing of his early experiences in Germany continued to normalize his relationship to the country. Although the writing of his memoirs was often an agonizing business, it undoubtedly helped him to put his memory of his youth into perspective. As a historian, especially when it came to the reconstruction of his own youth, he took his job seriously. He regained copies of Kicker and Fußballwoche, which he had read as a boy and exchanged letters with former classmates. One of them wrote back that he didn’t have much contact with other Schüler of the

886 “Letter”, addressee unknown, 3 March 1990; Peter Gay Papers; Box 3.2.
887 “Letter to Ilse Gubrich-Simitis”, 2 January 1990; Peter Gay Papers; Box 3.2.
Goetheschule. Most of their classmates had died in the war; survivors were scattered over West Germany. That was the reason why he had visited his old school and written his name in the guestbook, where a few years later Gay had found his name. His former classmate remembered a few of their names, among them were two Jews, Nelson and Ginkelwitsch, who left the school in 1936/7, a year before Gay. German critics of his memoirs noted Gay’s “admirable lack of rancor”, which inspired the political scientist Hartmut Jäckel to note in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: “Es ist nicht zuletzt eine unverhoffte Liebeserklärung an Berlin.”888 The Schulsekretärin of the Paul-Eipper-Grundschule in Berlin, how the Goetheschule was called now, wrote that she had received both of the class photos that Gay had sent her to put in the school’s Gästebuch.889 Sometimes in a very literal sense, Gay reintegrated his own story into the larger context of German history.

Eyewitness of the German Past

In his memoirs there was “not a trace of a declaration of love”890, Gay assured his German public in his acceptance speech of the Geschwister Scholl-Preis in 1999, which he received three years after Raul Hilberg. The detached pose of the scholar in his memoirs should not deceive anyone. After its publication, he wrote to Mosse that the “underlying rage and my attempt to contain it has misled people”.891 If there was one thing that he intended to communicate in his memoirs, he noted, it was his ambivalence about Germany.892 “I do not have the slightest intention of making things easy for you.”, he told the Germans at the ceremony.

In spite of his discovery of “good” German individuals, the German people was “on good behavior”893 as far as it concerned him. Although he observed a German-Jewish symbiosis before 1933, his personal relations with the German people were in 1999 far from “normal”. He confronted his German public with the failure of Germans and Jews to approach one another: “In the efforts to

889 “Letter to Gay”, 3 March 1984; Peter Gay Papers; Box 3.2.
890 Gay, “Verstreut und Vergessen”.
891 “Letter to Mosse”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.
892 Gay, “My German Question”.
893 Gay, My German Question, 199.
bring Germans and Jews closer together, all of them unsuccessful so far, it has become a virtual law of nature that the two misunderstand each other.” He observed that there were hardly any Jewish professors at German universities then; the handful of professors of Jewish origins “only write and teach in their ‘own’ domain—Jewish history, Jewish literature.” He added that in the United States “I never inquire which professors are Jewish, I only do that in Germany”.\footnote{Ibidem.} His mother recognized his uneasiness during one of his trips to Germany: “I can imagine that it is not easy to figure out people in Germany, when you are not living there for a longer time period.”\footnote{“Letter to his mother”, 13 October 1970; Peter Gay Papers; Box 4.2.} But even when he stayed in the country for eight months to conduct research in the 1980s, the burden of his past frequently overwhelmed him: “I would not wish to exaggerate the calm detachment and distance that I have managed with regard to Germany or with regard to Freud.”\footnote{“Letter to Dieter Ohlmaier”, 12 December 1989; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2.} Writing to a German colleague, he now claimed that the use of his mother tongue was never self-evident: “It is still somewhat difficult for me to lecture in German. This is not solely because of my early experiences, but also because I simply am quite unused these days to speaking it.”\footnote{Ibidem.} He never became completely German again, especially not in the company of Germans.

Even Gay’s awareness of the German resistance did not change this. He was less willing than some other émigré scholars to find traces of “good” in the period 1933-1945. For an émigré such as Stern, the knowledge of the German resistance in 1944 led to softer sentiments about the German past. Although he never became completely reconciled to Germany, he found in these resisters’ *Zivilcourage* a moral compass that eventually helped to navigate him back to Germany in a postwar world. Stern perceived that the resisters’ *Zivilcourage* could inspire a new morality in the West.\footnote{Fritz Stern, “Preface to the Morningside Edition”, *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany* (New York, 1992, 1955) 31.} Gay, on the other hand, had more difficulty overcoming that the majority of Germans had not resisted the Nazis. His friendship to Bracher’s wife, who was related to the Bonhoeffer, had in the first place opened his eyes to German victimhood, not to German heroism. Besides, he doubted the significance of the German resistance. While in an American paper he claimed that the Bonhoeffers defied
generalizations about the Germans, he told his German public that the attacks on Hitler in 1944 were “an article of faith” that was largely unsuccessful in overthrowing the Nazi regime. In his acceptance speech of the Scholl-Preis, the historian also minimized the meaning of the Scholls’ acts: “I have no intention of criticizing the Scholls and their tiny anti-Nazi cell. They were heroes, in the full sense of that much-abused word, who in their divine-naive innocence undertook actions whose failure was guaranteed and who, although an early, cruel death was predictable, continued to struggle against the German mass murderers with weapons alas only too harmless.” In these cases, the resisters lacked a sense of realism in planning their actions. He even suggested that the Scholls were not free from anti-Semitic prejudice in their reference to the “Jewish Question”. He ultimately understood this as an attempt to “persuade even anti-Semites that inhumanity is inhumanity, no matter who is the victim”. But his discussion of their strategy, instead of their ideology, still maintained its snarling edge.

Paradoxically, Gay’s support of the German-Jewish symbiosis, and rapprochement with German culture and some Germans, became increasingly interlaced with his larger position as an eyewitness of German crimes—though not yet the ones inflicted on himself. His first public reference to his own experiences in Germany was made to offset the stories circulated by Holocaust deniers in the United States. In 1962, Harry Elmer Barnes published the pamphlet “Revisionism and Brainwashing”, in which he claimed that the murder of the Jews was exaggerated. The conduct of the allies, Barnes stated, had been much more brutal than was generally known. Gay’s outrage about this pamphlet prompted his letter to The New York Times:

“When I was a boy, growing up in Berlin during the Nazi period, I remember many discussions of what the Berliners called KZ or KZ-Lager. We knew that they contained thousands of political prisoners, and that many never came back. People were picked up and disappeared, that much we knew […] I am writing this letter, and hope that you will publish it, as a small memorial to those who died in those camps, and those who survived only to read, now, that it never happened.

Peter Gay (formerly Peter Fröhlich)”

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899 Gay, “Verstreut und Vergessen”.
Gay’s position as eyewitness became more pertinent when many members of the first generation of émigré intellectuals had deceased or retired. Moreover, in 1970 two of his closest American friends and historians, Henry Roberts and Richard Hofstadter, whose thinking was deeply influenced by their work at the OSS during the war, died. The second generation of German émigré intellectuals increasingly became the last one to have experienced the rise of National Socialism. When a new generation of students and scholars was shaped to a larger extent by the polarizations of the Cold War than by the Second World War, the writer of Weimar Culture publicly came to represent both the good and the bad parts of the German past in the United States—especially since the rising controversy about the Holocaust demanded interpreters to determine its relevance to a larger American public. In his preface to the English translation of Bracher’s Die deutsche Diktatur (‘The German Dictatorship’, 1969) he called the Nazis’ crimes the “indispensable counterpoint” to American achievements:

“To those over forty, the Nazi nightmare, terrible and oppressive as it is, remains a memory to be, in some special sense, cherished—that is to be kept inviolate, intact, remembered as the tragic but indispensable counterpoint of a saner, humane view of the world and even of our time. For those under forty—and, of course, particularly under twenty—are haunted by no such ghosts. This generation sees the ‘obsession’ of the older generation as self-absorbed pity, or worse, a sly evasion of the evils that beset them. Not for the first time, and, doubtless not for the last, innocence and experience confront one another in baffled incomprehension.”

Gay felt misunderstood by the younger generation and not without cause, although the opposition he detected between its “innocence” and his own “experience” seems overstated. It must have seemed very annoying to many younger Americans that the confrontation with National Socialism and fascism often seemed to define what it meant to possess “experience”; and confusing, in the light of intellectuals’ frequent disagreement about Weimar’s lessons. Yet Gay continued to put his German questions on the American agenda. In the 1970s, he began to review books on Nazi Germany for

papers to influence younger Americans’ perception of the Holocaust: “I have heard teen-agers express
doubts, with the cruelly innocent sophistication of the young, about the ‘atrocity stories’ retailed by
grown-ups. Their skepticism, though depressing, is understandable.”

Gay’s memory of his experiences in Germany never faded. During the research of his
memoirs, sixty years later, he found out that a close neighbor, who had lent him Dickens when he was
a boy, was murdered in Auschwitz. Countering the assumption that emigration was exclusively an
intellectually stimulating affair, he noted in his review of Laura Fermi’s Illustrious Immigrants. The
Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930-41 that the volume did not do enough justice to “the trauma
of migration”. It “reduces or eliminates often severe intellectual and political conflicts.” While
many intellectuals and volumes celebrated (leftist) members of the intellectual emigration from
Germany, he thought that the praise covered up the struggles of many people who fled to the United
States. In 1966, he dedicated his little book A Loss of Mastery, about puritans’ American exile to the
victims of Nazism: “To all of these, I, a fortunate man, dedicate this book—who are in danger of being
forgotten heroes.”

Mutual Mistrust

In Gay’s case the Germans’ welcome was frequently half-hearted. He had been looking for a German
public since his Bernstein biography, and his moral duty to spread his insights into German history
never wavered. However, his endeavors to be admitted into the German elite were frequently in vain.
According to the Dutch historian Maarten Brands, an old friend, Gay was very eager to gain the
recognition of the German intellectual and political elite. But at his retirement dinner, the Brachers
were the only Germans, while Stern invited some prominent Germans such as Gräfin Marion Dönhoff
(who was not able to attend) and former Bundeskanzler Helmut Schmidt to his seventieth birthday.

903 Gay, “Review: Illustrious Immigrants. The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930-41 by Laura Fermi”,
904 Interview of the author with Maarten Brands, 12 September 2015. When Gay tried to get acquainted
to Bundespräsident Richard von Weizsäcker, the reply was that the president was too busy: “Ich binauch
zögerlich, entsprechende Hoffnungen zu nähren.” “Letter of Dr. Erich Milleker to Gay”; 19 May 1986,
Peter Gay Papers; Box 12.1.
While Stern became lavished with German recognition and badges of honor, like the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* (1999), the *Groses Verdienstkreuz* (2006) and an honorary doctorate of the University of Oldenburg (2013), Gay only received the *Geschwister Scholl-Preis* for his memoirs. His and Stern’s equally intense relationship to Germany highlights the impact of their different experiences of emigration to the United States on postwar attitudes towards Germany. Both émigrés left Nazi Germany in radically different manners. The Sterns were able to take with them many of their belongings, assisted by a Nazi patient of his father’s. Their position among the German elite must undoubtedly have kindled the later historian’s contacts with some of its prominent liberal members. Since his remarkable performance during the Fischer-**Kontroverse**, he established close friendships with the group of liberal intellectuals around *Die Zeit* and the Aspen Institute in Berlin, such as Gräfin Marion Dönhoff, Helmut Schmidt, the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf and the later Bundespräsident Richard von Weizsäcker.

Gay and his parents, on the other hand, arrived in the United States virtually broke. His father never really managed to set himself up after his emigration, due to his inability to speak English and his older age, and died prematurely in 1955. In spite of his embrace of some German intellectual and cultural traditions, these hardships did not mitigate Gay’s feelings towards the Germans. He occasionally appeared in the German media to talk about his work or to comment on the news, but he did not become part of an intellectual circle like Stern did. In his writings Stern was never as harsh about the Germans as Gay was. His memoirs do not contain passages that are as expressive about his hatred as this one in *My German Question*: “My hatred for Nazi past and present did not grow with the passage of time, only because it could hardly do so without my committing mayhem on the next German I encountered. No catharsis here!” Stern merely noted at the end of his memoirs that he was not sure whether his feelings of reconciliation would have been possible if his father had been harmed by the Nazis.

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905 In 1964 Stern had backed Fritz Fischer at a panel discussion at the German Historikertag, underscoring the need to examine continuities in modern German history instead of de-contextualizing National Socialism.

906 Gay, *My German Question*, x.
Moreover, Gay and Stern’s views that historians should play a role in encouraging a constructive national historical work, generated a different reading public. In the 1960s, Stern became increasingly skeptical as to the American receptivity to his historical views. Knowledge about European history and culture continued to be elementary “among the general reading public” in the United States: “If the American historian of Europe is no prophet in his own country, he can comfort himself by the hope of reaching a wider, transatlantic public.”

Naturally, the historian’s work about German history appealed more directly to the Germans. Like Gay, he believed that a constructive identity was elementary, and that historians should play a role to encourage national self-esteem. While this insight guaranteed Gay’s lifelong attachment to the Enlightenment, it encouraged Stern’s aim to stimulate a more German identity in his historical writings. The émigré here redeems Germany by partly overcoming his own past.

Gay’s liberal narratives had a clear relevance to American culture, but he had a less obvious stage in Germany. Although its rootedness in German experience and culture was neglected, his work on the Enlightenment received much critical acclaim since the beginning of the 1960s. A German reviewer noted after the publication of Voltaire’s Politics that there was a need in German academia for this updated biography of Voltaire. Although Gay had changed his name, the reviewer recognized that he was an émigré: “Es ist erfreulich und überraschend, in Deutschland zu bemerken, daß der hierzulande gleichermaßen an der Publizität verhinderte, 1934 aus Deutschland emigrierte Staatswissenschaftler Fr. Neumann Schüler hat; freilich: anscheinend nicht in der Staatswissenschaft.”

In Historische Zeitschrift a reviewer underlined the ground-breaking quality of Gay’s analysis of Voltaire’s political writings in the historical context. There was here no lingering resentment towards émigré historians. Still, in 1971, a representative of Beck Verlag wrote to him that the publishing company wasn’t going to translate his work on the Enlightenment into German, because

they thought that the historian was not well-known enough in the country.\textsuperscript{911} Besides, his cultural-historical approach remained largely unexplored by German social historians of German history. His liberal center did not appeal to the leftist German historians to whom he became friendly, such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler, and he himself distrusted most conservative German historians, who did share his cultural approach.

Gay’s work on German and German-Jewish history did find a German public, as well. His work on Bernstein and Weimar was translated into German fairly soon. According to the historian himself, his Bernstein book “enjoyed a certain following in a German translation”.\textsuperscript{912} Naturally, his and others’ support of the thesis of a German-Jewish symbiosis was often warmly received in Germany.\textsuperscript{913} But he frequently mistrusted the reasons behind this receptivity. In the preface of \textit{Freud, Jews and Other Germans}, he mentions with a slightly ironic tone the many invitations he got to perform at German radio and television after the volume’s publication.\textsuperscript{914} Although his contacts with Germany and the Germans relieved him of some of his hatred, he was all too aware that the Germans also needed émigrés. He agreed with historian Thomas Laqueur’s review of Stern’s memoirs \textit{Five Germany’s I Have Known}, in which he argued that the émigré had been a little too eager to receive German honors in exchange for stimulating Germany’s acceptance by the international community:

“This raises one of the most fascinating questions posed by this book: the nature of this welcome. Stern is by far the most honoured German-speaking refugee historian in Germany–perhaps in academia more generally. […] Germany needed its returning Jewish refugees for moral legitimacy, but not everyone would do. Stern was perfect. […] But Stern sells himself short by narrating a life driven so powerfully by the next lecture opportunity, by the desire to be in the company of his betters, by the pursuit of fame and recognition. There is nothing wrong with ambition but one wishes its objectives were more edifying.”\textsuperscript{915}

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\textsuperscript{911} “Letter of Beck Verlag to Gay”, 16 November 1971; Peter Gay Papers; Box 21. \textit{The Party of Humanity} was not published in Germany, because the American publisher asked for too much money.
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\textsuperscript{912} Gay, “Reflections on Hitler’s Refugees in the United States”, 125.
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\textsuperscript{914} Gay, “Preface”, x.
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Gay himself was not sufficiently tempted to pursue German honors, and limited his appreciation to parts of German intellectual and cultural history before 1933.

**The Nolte Controversy**

A decade before the actual *Historikerstreit* (1986/1987), Gay even became one of the first historians to attack Ernst Nolte’s comparative perspective on twentieth-century German history. This clash with Nolte would be his biggest conflict with a German historian. The vehemence of this battle was curious. Why did Gay, who had come to advocate a normalization of and a comparative approach to German history himself, attack Nolte so much earlier than many other historians?

Nolte’s comparative perspective in *Three Faces of Fascism* (1963) had initially induced Gay, and other German émigré historians such as Laqueur, Mosse and Stern, to welcome his work. In his book, Nolte presented the history of fascism as a reaction against modernity, which seemed to put him in the same camp as these émigrés. Like Nolte’s intellectual history, Gay’s approach entailed opening up German history to the larger context of European history: “The boundaries of German culture were wider than the boundaries of the German Reich. To write the history of German culture, then, is to write comparative history.”\(^9\)\(^1\)\(^6\) Stern noted that Nolte, together with Bracher and Dahrendorf, took his inspiration from Germany’s need for new beginnings: “They have renewed Germany’s ties to the West. They have been consistently open to new ideas and methods from abroad, and their work in turn has benefited ours.”\(^9\)\(^1\)\(^7\) In his autobiography, Stern defended his initial support of Nolte, who was a friend of his respectable mentor Hajo Holborn, and appreciated by many other established American historians.\(^9\)\(^1\)\(^8\) Since 1968, the Gays had even spent a couple of evenings with Nolte and his wife.

This socializing came to an end halfway through the 1970s. In his book *Deutschland und der Kalte Krieg* (1974), Nolte claimed that the American “crimes” in Vietnam were an even crueler version of the mass murder in Auschwitz. This book fundamentally changed Gay’s views on his German colleague’s merits, because he believed that Nolte’s comparison between Auschwitz and

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\(^9\)\(^1\)\(^6\) Gay, “Introduction”, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, 12.


\(^9\)\(^1\)\(^8\) Stern, *Five Germany’s I Have Known*, 435.
Vietnam was extremely inappropriate at a time when German historians were still expected to look at the United States for moral guidance. In *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, therefore, he stated that the “historical function” of Nolte’s work was “to cover over the special horror of German barbarity between 1933 and 1945”. He called Nolte’s method a “comparative trivialization”, “a sophisticated technique, because it appeals to liberal guilt arising from real inhumanities committed by Frenchmen, or Americans, in other parts of the world”. His basic assumption was stated clearly: the Holocaust was unique: “Modern Germany, with its calculated and massive barbarity, has been uniquely inhuman. Hitler was neither an unwelcome invader nor an uncaused accident. There was continuity and discontinuity between the nineteenth and twentieth century.”

Before his first attacks on Nolte in *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, Gay politely wrote to warn the German historian. Nolte answered that his official reply, “Die Pluralität der Nazi-Zeit?” would appear in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, because the *American Historical Review* had rejected it: “I do hope that in the end you can assent that to my opinion that even Auschwitz has to be placed into perspective, (though your perspective might be considerably different) and that historians should be the first to do it.” Gay agreed, but added that he was not sure that Nolte was the one to do this. When Nolte referred in his letter to a recent visit to Israel, Gay was still not convinced of the historian’s intentions: “I am, of course, glad that you found your stay in Israel interesting; I might note that you are ahead of me, I have never been to the country. But the substance of our intellectual disagreement remains intact.” Nolte got the impression that there was a general boycott of his views in American academia. The German historian wrote to Gay that several good friends and colleagues in the United States had withheld him from doing his article as lecture at American universities “with most depressing argumentations”. Gay assured him that he was not censoring Nolte in the United States.

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919 Ibidem.
921 “Letter of Ernst Nolte to Gay”, 1 October 1979; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2; Unprocessed.
922 “Letter of Gay to Ernst Nolte”, 4 January 1982; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2; Unprocessed.
923 “Letter of Ernst Nolte to Gay”, 12 January 1979; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2; Unprocessed.
924 “Letter of Gay to Ernst Nolte”, 12 March 1979; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2; Unprocessed.
The reactions of Gay’s direct colleagues were divided. Émigré intellectuals like Felix Gilbert were also “shocked” by Nolte’s “scandalous” work: “I am willing to sign whatever response you might suggest, but as you say, it is not easy, because of the ‘profound global view’ in which his poisonous statements are embedded.”\(^{925}\) Bracher explained that Nolte’s ideas, like his justification of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, were caused by his “Orginalitätssucht” and the influence of the controversial German philosopher Martin Heidegger.\(^{926}\) Bracher observed that Nolte’s political ignorance was mirrored by historians like Hans Mommsen and Geoffrey Barraclough, who advocated the thesis that the Third Reich was not the result of long-term planning, but a series of improvisations: “Dass diese Auffassung auch auf eine Apologie hinauflaufen kann, machen deine Hinweise deutlich. Vielleicht sollte man stärker die wissenschaftlichen Sachen Noltes betonen als eine politische Intention.”\(^{927}\) But there were also colleagues who thought that Gay exaggerated Nolte’s intentions. Wolfram Fischer, a friend of Gay’s, wrote that he found his attitude somewhat exaggerated: “Mir scheint, dass Sie Herr Nolte doch etwas harsch behandelt haben. Ich habe die Stellen immer noch nicht überprüft, kann mir aber einfach nicht vorstellen, dass er es so gemeint haben soll, wie Sie es interpretiert haben.”\(^{928}\) The German historian Erich Angermann dared to suggest that his German colleagues had in fact learned something since the 1930s: “Natürlich haben Sie recht, dass die Austreibung gerade der Besten in der Hitlerzeit für die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft gleichermassen eine Katastrophe war wie in jeder anderen Hinsicht. Zwar glaube ich, dass die deutschen Historiker – nicht zuletzt auf Grund amerikanischer Anregungen und Erfahrungen – in der Zwischenzeit doch einiges geleistet haben, das sich durchaus sehen lassen kann.”\(^{929}\) Fischer recognized the moral leadership of American historians, but was more convinced than Gay that German historical scholarship was capable of improvement.

The Nolte controversy underlines that historians on both sides of the Atlantic often had very different reasons to take positions. In 1986, the “real” *Historikerstreit* broke loose. The German

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\(^{925}\) “Letter of Felix Gilbert to Gay”, 6 March 1978; Peter Gay Papers; Box 6.2; Unprocessed.

\(^{926}\) Nolte was a student of Heidegger in the 1940s.

\(^{927}\) “Letter of Karl Dietrich Bracher to Gay”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 8.1; Unprocessed.

\(^{928}\) “Letter of Wolfram Fischer to Gay”, 28 December 1977; Peter Gay Papers; Box 8.1; Unprocessed.

\(^{929}\) “Letter of Erich Angermann to Gay”, 9 May 1980; Peter Gay Papers; Box 12.1; Unprocessed.
philosopher Jürgen Habermas would call Nolte and historians such as Andreas Hillgruber “neo-conservatives”. The occasion was Nolte’s article “Vergangenheit die nicht vergehen will” on 6 June 1986, in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Habermas continued to criticize the patriotism of the “center”. Gay, who defended the political center in the United States, grounded his rejection of Nolte slightly differently. Always aware of the political implications of his work, his comparative perspective and his own slow inclusion of German intellectual and cultural traditions led him to explicitly state that he did not want to excuse the Germans. His own comparative approach to German history was, therefore, a particularly important reason for his strong rejection of Nolte’s work. Paradoxically, his early clash with Nolte, therefore, also signaled American historians’ initial endorsement of Nolte and the broad effort to include Germany into the West.

**Between Bildung and the Holocaust**

The complexity of Gay’s attitudes towards Germany, wavering between German crimes and achievements, raises the question about their relationship to his own memory of Nazi Germany. In a lecture, he called his memoirs *My German Question* the “most personal of my books”, ⁹³⁰ a statement mainly remarkable for its acknowledgement of the personal dimension of the rest of his œuvre. But even when he started to publish works on German-Jewish history in the 1970s, the relationship between his defense of the German-Jewish symbiosis and experiences of anti-Semitism was not immediately evident. At first sight, Hilberg’s research into the murder of the Jews (or even Mosse’s research on nineteenth-century anti-Semitism) seems to represent a confrontation with the quintessential experience of European Jewry in the twentieth century that his focus on German-Jewish cultural contributions avoided. As the first of his generation of émigré historians to embark on research on the Holocaust, the Austrian historian’s project seemed far more daring. When he had announced the subject of his dissertation to Neumann, the older émigré agreed to supervise it, but plainly added: “It’s your funeral.”⁹³¹ Hilberg had faced years of struggle, partly because of Neumann’s untimely death in 1955, to get a respectable academic position and to publish his book. In sum, Gay’s

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⁹³⁰ “Lecture: ‘Writing my German Question’”, undated; Peter Gay Papers; Box 22; Unprocessed.
evolving, often conflicting, attitudes towards his German-Jewish background seem hard to connect to a constituting set of experiences. The variety of subjects in his oeuvre seems to make the search for a founding experience a preposterous project. Evidently, a closer scrutiny of the interactions between his memory of Nazi Germany and his work is necessary.

Gay started telling about his experiences in the summer of 1945, after seven years of silence. During a week at an International Summer Camp, it so happened “that I could bring myself to talk about the Kristallnacht, and then only under the most protected circumstances”. This revelation coincided with his and his parents’ acknowledgement of the news about the Holocaust, which they first hesitated to believe. His long silence, as we will see, decidedly set his narrative about his confrontation with National Socialism in an American context from the beginning. Around 1945 Gay referred shortly to the European murder of the Jews in his column in the Denver Clarion at the University of Denver, and continued to share his experiences with close friends. Yet while in this period émigré thought assisted his re-appreciation of German-Jewish Bildung in an American context, it still excluded his experiences in the Third Reich; in exile he rather developed the emphasis of his German-Jewish upbringing on reinvention than on trauma. In the 1940s and 1950s his reading of, and contacts to, “good” German émigrés, together with his larger criticism of American culture during McCarthyism, made his perception of German history and culture before 1933 more ambivalent. These émigrés allowed him to develop a more sophisticated approach to the values of the German tradition of Bildung and American culture, like rationality and secularism, which became manifest in his work on the Enlightenment. Moreover, his German-American identity was grounded in his own experiences to the extent that he did in fact escape the Holocaust and reinvented himself as “American”.

Gay has frequently made references that suggest a relationship between the values of his secular German-Jewish upbringing, like rationality and individuality, and his later defense of the Enlightenment. In an unpublished autobiographical account from the 1980s, he drew a parallel between his German-Jewish perspective in 1944 and his later work on Voltaire’s campaign: “A quarter

932 “Notebook 1983”.
century before I was to write a book on Voltaire, I heard ‘écrasez l’infâme’, not in so many words as in vivid variations: the pious Jews of Kempen and Posen, praying for rain during a flood, pushing coins into a cark? Register with their elbows on a Sabbath and the more religious the more crooked. I believed this— in my viscera I believe it still.⁹³³ His student paper “Webster’s Folly”, which he wrote at the University of Denver, was significantly dedicated to the fundamentally critical stance of his parents, “who taught me how to doubt”.⁹³⁴ He has made it clear that his first article on the Enlightenment in 1954 was not the fruit of much scholarly research; he had not “planned” to write Voltaire’s Politics at all.⁹³⁵ In his memoirs, he notes that this book would have pleased his father very much.⁹³⁶ There were, as we have seen, many factors involved in his decision to research the Enlightenment, like the rise of McCarthyism and American intellectuals’ pessimism about western culture. But in 1955 the death of his father, after a long illness, put his explorations of the eighteenth century in a very literal way at a crossroads between his old German-Jewish and American lives.

In the 1960s, Gay’s attitude towards his German-Jewish past was shaped by his encounters with some Germans who had stayed in Germany during the war, which opened him up to the German perspective. His writing of Weimar Culture expanded his awareness that a cultural identity offered an alternative to the suffering that he associated with his German past. When he received the invitation to write it, he recalled that he put everything else aside and wrote Weimar Culture “with intense engagement”.⁹³⁷ His identification with Weimar’s culture was not mixed up with traumatic memories, but a more composed feeling of tragedy; he noted that Weimar Culture carried a whiff of “melancholy”. It was not, he admitted, the prose of a distant observer; an “unmistakable air of mourning hangs over” this “elegy for a failed experiment”, epitomized by the many suicides of émigré intellectuals like Stefan Zweig, Walter Benjamin, Max Liebermann and other talented writers at the end of his book.

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⁹³³ “Notebook 1983”.
⁹³⁴ Gay, “Webster’s Folly. The Nature of Reality and the Problem of Definition.”; Paper for the Class “Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion” by Dr. William H. Bernhardt, 8 December 1944; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19; Unprocessed.
⁹³⁵ Gay, Voltaire’s Politics, xiii.
⁹³⁶ Gay, My German Question, 18.
⁹³⁷ Gay, My German Question, 200.
Since the 1970s he explicitly emphasized the emotional setting of his work, notably in *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*: “It is a piece of autobiography, part of reckoning with his origins and his changing life’s experience.”938 Just as in *Style in History*, Gay argues that objectivity can grow from subjectivity. He would like these essays to be read, and judged, as history: “It is, of course, neither possible nor desirable to segregate intellect from passion; but it should be possible to clarify the emotional stakes attached to his theses by laying bare their intellectual foundations [...] by contributing, that is, to the history of German Modernist culture with as much detachment as our – and my – inescapable engagement will permit.”939 His reconnection to Germans that had been part of his own German past allowed him to integrate his experiences in the Third Reich into his German-Jewish identity. His dialectical view to the past implied that his experiences had an impact on his narratives about his own past, which opened the way to acknowledging the good parts of his life in the Third Reich in his memoirs. His support of the Enlightenment and German-Jewish culture could now be connected. In *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* he elaborates on his personal experiences with Germany, his hatred and thoughts of revenge to his more complex attitude “not of forgiving and forgetting, but of recognizing that there were, and are, several Germany’s”.940 Painful though it had been to dwell on some of these matters, working on one of these Germany’s, which reflected nineteenth-century German-Jewish achievements, has been an “immense and prolonged pleasure to me”.941 His emphasis on German Jews’ achievements in these essays were in some ways a continuation of his earlier work on the Enlightenment. But they also testify to his new ability to emphasize more positive traces in German history, which in his volume he explicitly grounded in his personal perspective and “identity” as a historian. Still, the broader debate about the Holocaust and the larger position he occupied as eyewitness of German crimes made his own process of mastering his past difficult to explain publicly.

Gay waited until 1976, after he had started his psychoanalytical training, before elaborating on his experiences with National Socialism to the larger American public in his articles “Thinking about

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939 Idem., ix.
940 Idem., x.
941 Ibidem.
the Germans I” and “Thinking about the Germans II” in The New York Times. Two notebooks from
the early 1980s contain his first attempts to write down a full account of his experiences in Nazi
Germany to some of his friends. In 1983, the year that Gay turned sixty, the occasion that triggered the
writing of these accounts was an informal talk on “his Berlin years” to a group of fellows and
undergraduate students at Yale’s Davenport College at the invitation of his friend and colleague Henry
A. Turner, then master of that college. Afterwards, they regretted not having recorded the memorable
meeting. This event, and the encouragements of friends and his editor and friend Gladys Topkis,
induced him to write his memories down. Still, it still took him another fourteen years to go from his
talk to the publication of his memoirs: “I kept the story pretty much bottled up.”

Although My German Question contains the most extensive account of his experiences in the
Third Reich, it continues to put ambivalence at its center. Gay’s memoirs contain a firm declaration
of independence that contradicted that his scholarship was shaped by his experiences in the Third
Reich: “If some deem it necessary to connect experience and work, variety rather than uniformity
would be pertinent. […], over the years I have managed largely to free myself from the poisons of my
past and go my own way. […] If some deem it necessary to connect experience and work, variety
rather than uniformity would be pertinent.” Yet he also invites the reader to think about the
connections between his life and work: “If some refugees have been obsessed by the Holocaust, have I
been obsessed with an effort to recoil from it?” Gay’s own answer to this question is ambiguous: “I do
not think so, but I recognize that others might see me this way. It is notoriously true that we are bad
judges of ourselves, and the person we glimpse in the mirror may bear imagined no less than real
traits.” His Freudian lessons made him acknowledge the limits of individual self-awareness. He then
goes on to explain “the truth”:

“The truth is, I must confess, that I have deliberately refused to dwell on the mass murder of Europe’s Jews. I
have avoided movies that deal with it, even important ones, like Shoah. I have not yet been to the Holocaust
Museum in Washington. When in the mid-eighties we had an opportunity to visit Auschwitz, my wife went
alone. We all have our defenses to help us to get through life, and these happen to be mine. I am not proud of

942 “Lecture: ‘Writing my German Question’”.
them, but I see no need to apologize for them. Surely, my record of hard work shows that I have not fled to
hedonism to erase my past. Freud said that the most effective—or, rather, the least ineffective—way of dealing
with misery is work, and I can testify that Freud was right.”

Apparently, Gay did not want his reader to dismiss his refusal to engage explicitly with the Holocaust
as an irrational “obsession”, while stating that his work was a way of dealing with “misery”. But in
what sense? And what is the larger significance of this personal dimension of his work?

Psychoanalysis and Memory

Gay’s training in psychoanalysis in the 1970s was essential in connecting his memory of the Third
Reich to his defense of the Enlightenment. Starting in 1976, he spent seven years at the Western New
England Institute for Psychoanalysis at Yale University. At this “strictly orthodox Freudian
establishment”, he took his courses and did a bit of clinical work. During his training, for which he
also had to go into therapy, his experiences with National Socialism were extensively discussed. To
what degree did his use of psychoanalysis facilitate his writing of individual memory? Or did it merely
aid his exercise of control over his feelings?

His friend Arthur Mitzman wondered to what degree Gay’s experiences in the Third Reich
triggered this preoccupation with psychoanalysis. In a lecture after the publication of My German
Question, Gay emphasized the paramount influence of these experiences over the rest of his life: “I am
now seventy-five years old, my memoir is being published some fifty-nine years after we emigrated,
but there is something in me that remains, some residue, something unpleasant, perhaps even
dangerous.” Even when he stepped from the boat at Cuba on his first day of freedom, he still felt
trapped. But over the years, it was the omission of much of what he had experienced rather than his
actual reminiscence that troubled him: “Childhood forgotten (repressed) is as much a lost hell as a lost

943 Gay, My German Question, 203.
944 I found some notes that Gay had written during his therapy. They were not particularly revealing, but
demonstrated that his experiences in Nazi Germany were, naturally, an important theme during these
sessions.
946 Gay, “Lecture: ‘Writing My German Question’”.

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paradise, and most torment, I suggest, stems from the ardent wish not to recall what was once so painful.” He defined his victimhood largely in this interplay between the repression of memory and its sudden invasion of his life: “There are moments in one’s life when the past breaks through to assert its reality. Its naked power.” An example of a moment in which his memory suddenly took over reality happened can be found in 1947, during his first year at Columbia. He was “daydreaming”, when he crossed 45th Street and Broadway and a bus hit him. The accident left him with a skull fracture. The depressions from which he suffered as a student forced him to discuss his mental state with a doctor, who eventually wanted to check him into a medical institution. In a letter to his parents, his uncle Siegfried wrote that Gay had told him that Gay’s appointments with this doctor were doing him good; he also wanted to pay for the hypnosis treatment that the doctor recommended. Gay himself noted about his visits to a psychiatrist in New York immediately after the war: “Perhaps my interest in psychoanalysis began at that moment.” His Freudian approach to his memoirs meant that, among other things, the keen attention he paid to the factors of repression, sensuality and sexuality helped him to reconstruct a past that often continued to evade him in exile.

Still, psychoanalysis did not provide a fixed explanation of Gay’s youth in the Third Reich. His memory of his experiences had been broken into “scattered pieces”, leaving it impossible for him to compose a coherent narrative to understand and process his past, “far less legible, it seems to me, as I listen to others reminiscing, and reconstructing their lives than that of most articulate fellow humans.” In a speech after the publication of his memoirs, he pointed to the relationship between his use of both psychoanalysis and history to construct his story:

“The memoir is a historian’s book. That means two things. First, that I see myself in a wider political, social, religious context and pay close attention to the impact of larger events on me, on my awareness of myself, on my morale. Secondly, it means that I recognize the difference between the feelings and the knowledge I had at the time I am writing about, and the time I was writing the book. This double consciousness is, of course, the lot of

947 “Notebook 1983”.
948 “Letter of Siegfried to Gay”, 15 April 1947; Peter Gay Papers; Box 19; Unprocessed.
949 Gay, My German Question, 90.
950 “Diary: ‘Six Years’”, 22 July 1985; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1; Unprocessed.
everyone who writes a memoir or a full autobiography. But in my situation (I will not use the provocative term ‘case’), with my psychoanalytic training, I am particularly sensitive to this double vision.”

In his memoirs he is very open about the pitfalls of individual memory (the tension between memory and forgetting, the individual and the historical context, unwanted fluctuations between the “here” and “then”, etc.). Therefore, he used a historian’s procedure to write his memoirs. He interviewed people from his past and researched his personal papers, which he had carefully preserved. As a historian, he was more than averagely aware of the changing and controversial meaning of the historical context behind his early experiences. However, in the Third Reich he had, in spite of a certain precociousness, been much less aware of the broader historical context. This sharp development of his historical consciousness, set in German and American contexts, unjustly seems to obscure the authenticity of his early memories. Some critics thought that his memoirs were written in the distant prose of the scholar. But Gay’s “double vision”, bolstered by psychoanalysis, processed his development of consciousness in turning away from official historical scholarship on the Third Reich to his own experiences. His use of psychoanalysis helped him to define aspects of his individual experiences that the extreme polarization of his German-Jewish identity since his youth had prevented at the time itself: “I shall be talking about psychology. This is the kind of story that is usually lost amid the clamor of historic events.” So he barely narrates the “official” succession of events (like the Nazi-succession of power, the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws, etc.) that often define accounts of the persecution of the Jews. He does not even mention his memories of the Nazis’ accession to power in 1933. Instead, he used psychoanalysis to reconstruct his daily life in the Third Reich:

951 “Lecture: ‘Writing my German Question’”.
954 Gay, My German Question, 22.
“With these pages I wanted to reveal as much from my mind as possible. But I had also a broader aim in mind. The life of an individual is, as we all know, as much an internal as an external drama. How I took the continuous insults, the gradual closing in of the noose around my neck, was of considerable interest to me. But I thought that it might also be of some interest to others. We have had, and will, I think, continue to have memoirs from people like me until our generation runs out of steam. But few (indeed, let me say, to the best of my knowledge, any) have dealt with this psychological situation, this unobtrusive yet all-important way of coping.”

In *My German Question*, psychoanalysis helped him to reconstruct his daily, more ambivalent experiences, which allowed him to lift a little the veil of gloom that hung over his memory of the period. Even in the Third Reich there were “unmixed, pure pleasures”, like eating chocolate, following sports, and collecting stamps. His psychological approach fuelled his awareness that his life in the Third Reich was not completely shaped by National Socialism; not the Nazis, but his parents first made him: “The Nazis did not make me wholly. I responded to them as one largely formed – I was 9,5 in January 1933– by forces less … and more … than they: my parents, especially my father. He determined my direction.” In this sense, his use of psychoanalysis since the 1970s facilitated a more positive, liberating connection between his experiences in the Third Reich and his work.

Psychoanalysis helped Gay to further explain these links between his German and American identity, which he himself did not fully appreciate in the 1950s. On one occasion, he met a friend of the Hofstadters of East-European descent who expressed, according to him, his uneasiness with American culture through his use of the word “goyim”. It took him some time to realize the significance of this episode: “Only after my memories of having been at home in Germany – memories that I had repressed with single-minded ferocity– re-emerged, could I interpret that scene on the Wellfleet beach in all its rich and puzzling significance.” With the help of psychoanalysis, he realized that he had not merely repressed his negative, but also his positive memories of his life in the Third Reich. He now became able to perceive that his acculturation in Germany had anticipated his ability to “unpack his suitcase” in the United States. In fact, his identification with the United States

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955 Gay, “Writing My German Question”.
956 “Notebook 1983”.
preceded his emigration. Other German Jews found a broader context with which to identify in
Europe, but Gay’s parents’ often precarious financial situation meant that the young Peter had never been outside Germany. The last trip the Gays made, visiting picturesque villages that displayed many anti-Semitic slogans, was above all “a farewell”. More than Europe, his identification with the United States offered a way out of the strains of his life in Nazi Germany: “I had been infatuated with America for several years before I saw the country, before I could be sure that I would ever see it.”
Indeed, an “American” attitude of hope dominated in the Third Reich: “We expressed more optimism than we felt; the discussions about my future, which became graver from 1937 on, and in which I, precociously grown, always participated, were as businesslike and as full of hope as we could manage.” The German “super-good boy” was filled with an overriding desire to become a “good American” in exile. In this sense, his American exile did not contrast with his German background, but continued to embody his hope: “Yet I know, as my energetic throwing myself into preparations for America made clear, knew to my bones that life now had become possible once more, that my silent, almost unconscious ambition to become someone in the world […], now had room to play once more. In the years to come, years of poverty, that sense of myself never wavered or weakened”. During the early years of hardship after his exile, in which he had to take jobs, leave school and see his father suffering, he continued to hope that his life would become better.

Although this seems to justify the accusation that his exile was a “second assimilation”, which seems to question its authenticity, Gay justified his stance by pointing to its function in the present:

“It is only when we discard the whole issue of ‘forgiveness’ as a wrong way of dealing with the whole question, that the relation of the modern German Jew to Germany can be clarified at all. There are many Jews who say: ‘I will never forgive them.’ But what we must see is that forgiveness is not the issue. There were those Germans who did unforgivable things, and them one ought not to forgive. And there were other Germans who need no

958 Gay, My German Question, 75.
960 “Notebook 1983”.
961 Gay, My German Question, iv.
962 Idem., 170.
963 “Notebook 1983”.
forgiveness at all. The question is rather one of seeking to make oneself comfortable. The Jew who will not buy a VW or a Mercedes is simply testifying to his lack of comfort…”

Gay moved the fundamental question about a forgiveness of the past to the more practical level: without obscuring historical complexity, the past should make one as “comfortable” as possible. He did not lapse into simple mythmaking, but found a way that partly helped him to control strong emotions like hatred and forgiveness that were reflected in the discourse of “secular religion”: “The tragicomedy I envisaged must not remain the melodrama –good Germans abroad, bad Germans at home– by which I had lived for so long.” This individual necessity was further legitimizd by its broader relevance. His embrace of parts of this past provided him with a framework with which to critically interpret the United States, while his early hatred had led to his larger idealization of the country. In this way, the earlier dynamic between his hatred of Germany and idealization of the United States was replaced by a more constructive interaction between his experiences in Germany and the United States that legitimized his belief in the German-Jewish symbiosis and “American” culture.

In his memoirs Gay’s partial identification with Germany was reflected in his preference for Berlin. Many other German émigrés found a substitute for their German identity in modernity, avant-gardism, modernism and the innovative and experimental spirit; they “buried ‘Jewishness’ under a cosmopolitan internationalism”. Gay, however, endowed his own support of the transatlantic relationship with the local colors of Berlin, the city in which he had been born. The historian recognized Berlin’s humor: blunt, cynical, democratic, busy deflating the bloated and the pretentious: “Berlin’s characteristic speech was quite anti-authoritarian.” About his first visit to Germany in 1961, he wrote in his memoirs: “I discovered in myself traces of the Berliner I had been before 1933.” But since this Weimar Berliner had been ten when the Nazis came to power, his identification with Germany’s capital was above all a careful expression of his position in American exile. Instead of a continuation of the tradition of Bildung or a processing of his trauma, Gay’s

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964 Ibidem.
965 Gay, My German Question, 196.
966 Walter Sokel, quoted in Anderson, “The Silent Generation”, 34
967 Gay, My German Question, 14.
968 Idem., 13.
identification with the broader context of German history was fabricated between Berliner and American culture. He considered it his birth right to reclaim back prewar Berlin as his cultural background: “In sum, everything at home was as it should have been and would have continued to be but for a historical catastrophe when I was nine and a half.”969 His exiled Berlin represented the German past that he felt himself entitled to, were it not for the Nazis’ accession to power. Constructed between present and past needs, hopes and fears, his psychological-historical approach to his own past contained a liberating element that allowed his constructive reinvention of his German-Jewish identity in the United States.

Gay, therefore, did not believe that he merely continued the values of his German-Jewish background in the United States. During the first conference of the Leo Baeck Institute in Berlin “Self-Assertion in Adversity: The Jews in National Socialist Germany, 1933-1939”, with fellow émigré historians Werner E. Mosse, Peter Pulzer, Gay denied that he had continued to be a German in the United States. He contradicted Aschheim’s thesis of “once a German always a German, at least in part”.970 His emphasis on individual reinvention reflected his individual history as acculturated Jew and American, which he did not, as so many others, associate with meekness but with resistance against others’ definition of his German-Jewish identity: “My special status at the Goethe Realgymnasium...was an illumination: the power of others over me, including my self-definition.”971 Cultivating acculturation as a form of resistance, he tried to master his past through his active reinventions of his Jewish German-American identity.

Many of the letters he received after the publication of his memoirs underline the significance of Gay’s portrait of his Jewish German-American identity. Mosse wrote Gay that he had read My German Question just after finishing his own memoirs. Gay’s first émigré evocation of Weimar culture in 1968 appealed to Mosse’s own views: “Your book on Weimar had a great impact on myself as on so many others.”972 Mosse noted how much he recognized Gay’s views on German culture: Berlin's architecture, they agreed, had not, like its people, turned for the better.

969 Idem., 35.
971 “Notebook 1983”.
972 “Letter of George Mosse to Gay”, 31 October 1998; Peter Gay Papers; Box 22; Unprocessed.
The Good Boy

Gay’s liberating insight that his German identity was not limited to his experiences with National Socialism was not uncomplicated. One reason for his ongoing hesitancy to publish his memoirs was his controversial message. He feared that the complexity of his narrative would not be recognized in the still deeply polarized debate about the Holocaust; he was not sure that his “inward journey would be appreciated”.\(^{973}\) Still, the historian made sure to embed his testimony of psychological complexity in a clear political statement: Jews had not gone “as lambs to the slaughterhouse”, as was often stated. The émigré set out to use his own story to elucidate why so many did not flee or resist Hitler.

One of Gay’s memoirs’ more controversial aspects is that his German-Jewish background was not only partly liberating him from exclusive associations with the Nazis, but also shaped his victimhood. Not only the Nazis, but also his parents’ strict liberal values made life in the Third Reich into an ordeal. His parents’ recent break with their Jewish background compounded a resolute stance against the irrationality of Nazism as well as Judaism. They strongly commended consistency and truth-telling, something that led them to discuss everything with their son (besides sexuality). The high-minded ideals of his parents’ liberalism, which they projected onto their son, provided him with an unreliable sense of self. “My family,” he claimed, “seemed engaged in a well-intentioned conspiracy to nourish my illusion of being merely perfect.”\(^{974}\) To be “perfect” in the Third Reich, however, appeared to be somewhat isolating.

Gay’s parents’ conviction that they represented the “good” Germany made the burden of the “good boy” even heavier: “We were Germans; the gangsters who had taken control of the country were not Germany—we were.”\(^{975}\) This knowledge made them “into a secret society, one to which we admitted a few others, like my fairly extensive family”. Their abandonment of Judaism just before their German identity became denied by others, placed the Gays on a little, unspoiled island: “The myth of perfection by which my parents and I lived, a veritable folie à trois, was too precious to be tarnished by the reality

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\(^{973}\) Gay, My German Question, 210-11.
\(^{974}\) Idem., 115.
\(^{975}\) Idem., 111.
of mixed feelings that troubled other, more ordinary mortals.” While he supported a “recovery of nerve” against pessimism in his historical work, he called his parents’ attitude a sometimes grotesque “conspiracy of cheerfulness” that covered up the more aching aspects of their lives.

Under the strains of daily life in the Third Reich, rationality often lapsed into suffocating restraint. Gay’s parents’ refusal of their victimhood created its own problems, which is much more elaborated on in his unpublished accounts than in My German Question. At his Nazified German school, where Jewish children frequently encountered more anti-Semitism than their parents, his suffering was especially strong: “How did I stay sane in this world of unrelenting denigration, of increasing despair and narrowing options?” Partly, he states, he did not stay sane, a significant statement for someone who developed a sense of psychological “sanity”:

“[I] practiced systematic denial, a partial self-anesthesia […], symptoms that suggest how deeply I suffered, and how little I actually knew of my suffering then […], the threat was, for some years, like a series of irregular assaults, with several naked, seductive retreats in between. It was only in early 1938 or so—one’s perception of this differed from that of others—that the rhythm of hatred became more insistent; the need for escape was more urgent than before. […], it is hard to portray, to someone who has not experienced it, the pervasiveness, the persistence, the heartless malice of the vilification to which German Jews were subjected […], and as I have said, the campaign was strident and unopposed.”

They attacked one's very self-respect: “We were vermin.” The “Nazi experience was unsettling—a weak word; it was above all, depressing.” He did not cry or panic once and never asked his parents for help; he was pale and often without appetite: “But the family charade went on.”

Gay’s parents’ education in self-control taught him to endure his suffering: “Having learned to banish from awareness, or at least to control, my rage, I was not about to make uncalled-for remarks or even faces at fluttering black-red-and-white flags adorned with the swastika or the sordid spectacle of brownshirts marching down Berlin’s streets as though they owned them—as, of course, they did after

976 Idem., 40.
978 “Notebook 1983”.
January 30, 1933."979 The well-behaved boy was trained not to draw attention to himself. Not merely the Nazis’ attacks, but also his “liberal” defense mechanisms defined his position as victim: “Nature and my parents seem to have prepared me well for the hazards of daily life under the Nazis.”980 Although Gay’s enlightened, liberal ideals provided him with a moral identity that helped him to distinguish himself from the National Socialists, they were difficult to live up to—especially for a child. His moral position made him often unable to discern the difference between reality and ideals. Gay developed a need for “spotless heroes”. 981 He was absolutely convinced that he had the best parents ever.

Ironically, in the Third Reich Gay experienced intense feelings of idealization and depression, while he was taught that rationality was the highest value. His parents’ projection of perfection, therefore, led to Gay’s own apprehension of failure: “To be so good had to be a screen for being afraid of being very bad.”982 He felt a –most of the time– unconscious rancor towards them. In one of his notebooks, he admitted “to wish such a father dead, even in the most secluded privacy, was worse than a crime—it was irrationality itself”.983 Especially in exile, he did not only come to see the irrationality of religious Jews and Nazis, but also of himself: “I have become convinced that my closing in on my victimhood expressed some unconscious rage, a hostile feeling that I had learned to repress.”984 On the Gays’ liberal island, every need for a less rational community remained unacknowledged. His parents rejected any “tribal identification”.985 The “idea of attachment to a social community or a common social heritage was virtually meaningless to my parents”.986 Other Jewish children found a sense of belonging in Jewish groups: “The parents who sent their children to Jewish schools from 1933 on might know little of Jewish culture, Jewish religion, Jewish history, but they knew enough, they believed to give their children, and themselves, a secure identity that could take daily insults as just another instance of barbarism.”987 The Zionists made a radical break, not just with the Third Reich but

979 Gay, My German Question, 57.
980 Idem., 57.
981 Idem., 116.
982 Idem., 36.
983 “Notebook 1983”.
984 Gay, My German Question, 40.
985 Ibidem.
986 Idem., 49.
with all of Germany, and “this gave them a place to stand”. It “gave their children a secure identity”. 988

In hindsight, Gay realized that his parents’ official secularism frequently contained “mixed signals” about their Jewish identity. He himself was circumcised, a deed of which even the later historian could make no sense. When a boy from their neighborhood convinced him that he should do his Bar Mitzvah to declare his solidarity, his liberal parents told him that he should decide this for himself (after much thought he, of course, decided to abandon the plan): “For my parents and for me, cherishing our Jewishness was not an acceptable option.” 989

In exile, Gay’s irrational needs mainly found innocent outlets, but even in his memoirs he refers to them as some sort of guilty pleasure: “Rarely as I now attend football games, I cannot enter a stadium without feeling overcome by the most irrational excitement, take irrevocable sides even between tears I have never seen before, and dread, at the moment of kickoff that inexorable moment an hour and three quarters later, when the game will be over.” 990 An easiness towards the position of victim and his Jewish background lingered. His references to his experience with anti-Semitism are much stronger in his notebooks than in his official memoirs. In an interview in 1980s for the Fortunoff Video archive for Holocaust Testimonies, he claimed that his father called him “at his work” to urge him to come home on November 9, 1938, after which he told “the other employees” about the violations of Jewish lives and possessions. 991 In his memoirs, however, he mentions that it was in fact during a meeting of the Jewish Boy Scout group the Ringbund, which he had joined in 1934 because he needed some exercise, that he received his father’s message. 992 After the publication of his memoirs, one reader wrote Gay: “No one has ever come closer to understanding and describing the burden of ‘secular Judaism’ than you have.” 993

988 Idem., 110.
989 Ibidem.
990 “Notebook 1983”.
992 Gay, My German Question, 54.
993 “Letter of Renate Teichman to Gay”, 14 May 1999; Peter Gay Papers; Box 16; Unprocessed.
Jewish Anti-Semitism

It is part of the tragedy of many second-generation émigrés such as Gay that their feelings of responsibility towards their often less successfully integrated parents limited their possibilities of reinventing their self-perception in exile. Gay’s professional success obliged him to represent a German-Jewish past that he was at the time itself too young to be responsible for, because his parents were not able to defend their choices in the United States. He claims that it is the main intention of his memoirs to defend the older generation of émigrés’ lack of resistance and their delayed or never taken decision to leave Germany. Because Morris Gay managed to get his family out of Nazi Germany, he called his father, not himself, the “hero” of his memoirs.

While the awareness that “his parents made him” contained a liberating element, Gay’s memoirs suggest his awareness of other disadvantages of this attachment, as well. The Gays’ representation of German culture had a very controversial side. Like many other German Jews, his father “did not really like East European Jews”. His parents were making jokes about east European Jews, “often not very friendly”. He explained his parents’ position: their sentiment, shared by many other German Jews, was “a symptom of remnants of insecurity that Ostjuden would feed anti-Semitism. […] he did not see that the convinced anti-Semite needs no evidence”. But after hearing about Moritz Gay’s views his wife Ruth exclaimed: “Your father was an anti-Semite!” Gay added that she regretted this, because she liked “his vitality, his strength, his immense influence on me”. He confessed that this episode troubled him, until he “explained it away with the thought that my father’s contempt for Jewish piety was a reflection of his limited experience, had he known catholic hypocrites, he would have his rationalism by anecdotes about priests”. In his memoirs, he only implicitly refers to his own internalization of Jewish stereotypes. He mentioned that he copied his rational parents’ rejection of his uncle and aunt, who showed the “noisy, tearful affectionateness of so many other families”. He only half believed his father that the Nazis’ newspapers were full of lies

994 Gay, My German Question, 22.
995 Interview with the author, 10 May 2009.
996 Gay, My German Question, 114.
997 “Notebook 1983”.
concerning particular Jewish traits. His uncle Guillermo Kohnke (“Willy”) accused them of having only emigrated because of the violence perpetrated by the Nazis against them, not because of “ideological difference”: “Ihr dachtet in vielem genauso wie die Nazis.”

Gay’s psychological approach to his past highlighted not only a more convenient German past, but also endowed his memories with a new sense of responsibility that defied time and space. He never mentioned any resistance against the Nazis practices he observed. Naturally, he was only a child at the time, but especially in hindsight this passivity must have complicated his feelings of defending a superior Germany. He had not experienced any anti-Semitism at his school, partly due to his luck that he did not “look Jewish”, but his cousin Edgar did, and was severely bullied at the Nazified school they both attended. Gay never referred to any interference on his side. Mosse’s memoirs more openly state his feelings of guilt in this context: “The fact that I witnessed the bullying and was too cowardly to come forward and aid my fellow Jew haunted me at the time and deepened my inferiority complex.” One of the very few dreams that Gay wrote down testifies to his ongoing bewilderment about his and his parents’ identification with a German identity in the Third Reich. In a travel log of a trip to Florence, Gay wrote down a “humiliating” dream he apparently found significant: “I am in a restaurant with my parents; the waiter preparing a salad soup, ‘That’s a German salad.’ Father: ‘Oh.’ Waiter (at me): ‘I bet when he was a young man he liked Hitler.’ I go after him with fury, we square off; but he is clearly stronger than I. ‘Why should any decent man like Hitler? He killed millions of Jews.’ Waiter: ‘Is that so bad? And the Jews killed my brother.’ And I can do nothing.” In his representation of the good parts of German culture Germany, he could not fully separate them from the bad.

Another psychological mechanism in Gay’s memoirs also turns traditional categories of victims and perpetrators upside down. He recognized Anna Freud’s observation of the victim’s identification with the aggressor: “To be in the victor’s shoes just once, to relax our vigilance and the

998 Gay, My German Question, 15.
999 “Letter of Guillermo Kohnke to Gay”, 19 November 1939; Peter Gay Papers; Box 5.1; Unprocessed.
1000 Gay, My German Question, 57.
1001 Mosse, Confronting History, 64.
1002 “Notes”; Peter Gay Papers; Box 13.1; Unprocessed.
constant need to keep our critical faculties alert to dismiss ever new libels, to march with the
triunphant enemy, to have someone to admire beyond reason! [...] I find it repulsive to confess the
very existence of such an obscene aberration, even to think about it, however fleeting and occasional it
must have been.” This mental exploration of the other side was made concrete by a “handful of right-
wing Jews who in 1933 thought it possible to reach an accommodation with the Nazis soon learned
that they had foolishly misjudged the intentions of the Führer. [...] but after three or four years of
trying to stand erect in the whirlwind of hate and contempt, the most resilient among us found that
keeping our defenses in working order was exhausting.” It is common for children, and indeed
adults, to want to belong to the side of the winners, rather than the side of the losers.

Although Gay was still a child, his psychological approach transcended the borders of the
Third Reich. While this entailed his ability to create a broader German cultural identity, it also
suggested that his perceptions and stereotypes were not necessarily tied to his German youth, but
persisted in exile, even in adulthood. On a psychological level, therefore, they did develop an
ambiguous moral responsibility. Also other second-generation émigrés, who used psychology to probe
their ties to Germany in exile, realized this problematic connection. These émigrés did not identify
with victims, nor were they perpetrators; their childhood in the Third Reich largely made them passive
observers of German crimes, which they did not commit nor resisted. This became problematic when
after the war German history became a moral narrative to many postwar American and émigré
intellectuals. The rise of National Socialism and the Second World War were thought to reveal
intimate details about what was “good” and “bad” human conduct. Yet Stern had to note: “I could
easily confess that I didn’t know how I would have behaved, only how I could have wished to behave.
I relished the ironic formulation by which I acknowledged that I had been spared the National
Socialist temptation not through any special virtue.” Stern’s memoirs refer to his early
confrontation with National Socialism as a moral test he did not take because of his early age, and
something he was therefore forced to repeat after the war. Mosse’s memoirs reveal a comparable

1003 Gay, My German Question, 109. Gay also mentions the attraction of belonging to “the winning
party: “They [the Nazis] were winners: These were the winners with whom I cast my lot. Old
habits die hard, I suppose, because they attest to personal needs.” 166.
1004 Stern, Five Germany’s I Have Known, 427.
capability for self-criticism: “I was far from immune to the irrational forces which as a historian I deplored.”

A psychological approach, therefore, created a new sense of moral responsibility that could grow in later age. When he started to attend college Gay came to realize the controversial aspects of his and his parents’ identification with German culture. But although he experienced a brief period of repudiating German culture, he was not willing to break with his parents’ ongoing attachment. Not only did he perceive that German intellectual traditions countered American anti-intellectualism, a cultural identification with German culture also offered ways to develop more constructive connections to a past that continued to haunt him. His self-fashioning as representative of German culture in the United States offered an alternative, more positive identity in a debate that was dominated by alienating definitions of victimhood and perpetration. Although Gay’s account of his “innocent” childhood in the Third Reich might initially have seemed the ultimate starting point from which to draw conventional dividing lines between perpetrators and victims, his views were in fact much more delicately nuanced. As a German Jew, he escaped the religious ties of his own past and the irrationality of the Nazis, but was to a degree trapped by the complexity of his own moral imagination.

**History and Memory**

In his memoirs Gay asks the question as to what degree his historical work was grounded in an avoidance of the Holocaust. Yet he himself was all too aware that he had in fact escaped the Holocaust, while he pursued a successful career as American historian. Therefore, the connections between the historian’s work and his memory did not reflect an increasing processing of his trauma, while his earlier stance was shaped by repression. Instead, his active resistance against his victimhood was partly grounded in his actual escape from the Nazis. In the polarized debate about the Nazi past he was unable to express the ambivalence of his experiences. As a result, he chose to cultivate that part of his experiences that emphasized reinvention rather than trauma. He began to understand more fully that to become an American implied his acceptance that he had been, and to some degree still was, a

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1005 Mosse, *Confronting History*, 171.
1006 Interview with the author, 10 February 2008.
German. So paradoxically, in exile his process of Americanization entailed his Germanization as well; both were deeply connected. His capacity “as acculturated Jew” helped him to reinvent himself as American. Moreover, his representation of his parents’ position as secular German Jews, which in his historical work culminated in *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, was fuelled by his acculturation into American culture. His feeling of responsibility to express his parents’ position, which he considered so misrepresented in postwar historians’ debates, compelled him to take this role.

Gay’s writing of history and memory were intertwined in his cultivation of his role as historian. His representation of an acculturated German-Jewish perspective could only be expressed through his adoption of a more sophisticated cultural-intellectual approach than his parents’. In his work his integration of this German-Jewish background was encouraged by his cultivation of perspectival realism, which demanded that historians should acknowledge their historical role in order to construct a defined identity. Increasingly he realized, emphasized and explained his own perspective in his historical work, relating his defense of western culture to his own experiences. In his view, therefore, individuality is partly historically defined.

Furthermore, Gay’s historical role comprised of defending the country that took the refugee in. In spite of his early criticism of the United States, his cultivation of the role of émigré historian implied his task to bolster American confidence. This entailed his omission of parts of his experiences. His memoirs do not contain references to actual American anti-Semitism. The strikingly unwelcome label of “enemy alien”, which was also applied to the German Gays, does not appear either. Gay’s need for “spotless heroes” continued to be projected on to the United States. Yet he does allude in his memoirs to the American refusal to allow the St. Louis, the ship to Cuba on which the Gays had initially planned to leave the country, to dock on its territory. Gay noted that luckily he was unaware at the time that during the Olympics of 1936 the Americans had refused to accept two Jews on their team: “I am glad in retrospect that I did not know this in 1936. It would have threatened my idealization of the United States.” Ultimately, in his memoirs his criticism of Bildung and American liberalism do not contradict his support of them. While his narrative of his experiences

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1007 Gay, “Writing ‘My German Question’”. 
points to the limitations of rationality, it also explained the importance of reason because his
historical-psychoanalytical methodology aided his expression of the complexity of his experiences.

It is too straightforward to dismiss Gay’s construction of memory, aided by his psychological-historical methodology, as artificial. He frequently expresses strong emotions towards Germany, which at the same time facilitated crossing the borders between Germans and Jews. Besides, he has always disagreed with statements that emotions are more “true” or “authentic” than efforts to control them. While general “history” and individual “memory” are often contrasted, his development of a historical and psychoanalytical approach served to individualize the large polarizations surrounding his German-Jewish identity. Psychoanalysis helped him to redefine the relationship between his own experiences and the dominant historical context of National Socialism and the Holocaust that threatened to swallow historical complexity. The heated debate about German-Jewish history in postwar American debates must have often felt more alienating, and in any case less constructive, than his own cultural visions, informed by his individual experiences of German history and disciplined by historical methodology and psychoanalysis.

So while in Style in History he stated that subjectivity can lead to objectivity, Gay also thought that a scholarly approach could pave the way to individual memory. His psychological approach offered an alternative narrative to the history of political events, which liberated him from being exclusively defined by the experience with National Socialism, as well as endowed him with a new sense of moral responsibility. His German-American imagination appears as a liberating device: “To take issue with the dominant distrust of ‘the German’ is, thus, not to repress the horrors that Nazism visited upon the world. To trivialize them would to be to betray its victims, and myself. But it is liberating to recapture the complexity of the past instead of living by slogans and melodrama.”

His Jewish German-American identity made his work valuable in the postwar rebuilding of a new confidence that was not exclusively built on the ruins of war. In 1992, a journalist of Die Tageszeitung noted that in a lecture about Max Liebermann, Gay did not pay attention to the painter’s experiences during the rise of anti-Semitism.

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while this Jewish historian continued to escape. Not a stable Jewish identity but his active resistance against stereotypes defined his "Jewishness".

Gay was convinced that his particular perspective had something to offer the broader public in its defense of an anti-ideological political center. Second-generation émigrés such as Mosse, Gay and Stern in some ways less defined moral position offered possibilities for more nuanced views on the German past. It permitted Gay to go against the grain of historical scholarship, supporting the Enlightenment and the bourgeoisie. His psychological-cultural approach aided his reconstruction of a center between German crimes and achievements, German and western traditions. But the far-reaching consequences of his approach also compelled them to avoid researching the Holocaust. His approach to his German-Jewish past certainly has its limitations; his writings often ignored the history of Jews, anti-Semitism and radicalism of any kind. For this reason, in his writings about German-Jewish and German history he limited himself to short, biographical essays, rooted in his personal perspective as émigré historian. Fearing that a psychologization of German crimes threatened to lapse into moral relativism, he only dealt with the Nazi period in his memoirs. In a way, he needed to continue seeing the period 1933-1945 as "evil" point of reference in order to nuance the differences between rationality and irrationality in the period before that.
Conclusion:

The Achievements of Acculturation

This first extensive research of Peter Gay’s life (1923-2015) and work set out to examine the impact of the historian’s emigration from Nazi Germany to the United States on his defense of the contested idea of western culture at the beginning of the Cold War. It explored the interactions between his experiences, scholarship and memory of the Third Reich between the 1930s to the 1970s. During this period his emigration from Nazi Germany in 1939, and his gradual but never completed return to Germany, dramatized broader tensions and exchange of the transatlantic relationship.

This dissertation highlights the impact of the memory of the Second World on postwar American and émigré intellectuals’ debates about western culture during the Cold War, which formed the background of Gay’s scholarship. In the designated period, in which historical syntheses were initially absent, intellectuals began to grapple with the significance of the rise of National Socialism at the center of the West. While American scholars were challenged by the definition of national identity as part of a transatlantic, western culture, many German and émigré scholars faced the burden of the Nazi past in West Germany’s attempts to reintegrate into the West. This shared quest for the West, on which the two countries embarked from opposite sides, propelled the German-American relationship to the center of the debate about its identity.

However, this search frequently drove the transatlantic allies apart or lapsed into pessimist attitudes towards western culture. The examination of Gay’s life and work points to three phases in the development of American and émigrés’ grappling with the significance of the recent German past for western culture, particularly in New York. During and just after the war, war propaganda encouraged views of the German “villain” and the American “victor” which often appeared to constitute opposite poles in the debate about the West. In this period German historical scholarship was still dominated by conservative intellectuals who mostly refused to deal with questions of individual responsibility for the rise of National Socialism. At the end of the 1940s, American intellectuals increasingly used
German theoretical traditions, while ideas of American exceptionalism persisted in highlighting the differences between German ideology and American liberalism. Finally, in the 1960s and 1970s Americans’ broader awareness of the Holocaust and New Left intellectuals’ celebration of German intellectual traditions and the Weimar’s Left’s politics further polarized the significance of the German past. Gay’s position as Jewish German-American émigré historian underscores the complexity and diversity of the experiences and perceptions about German (and American) history and culture that infused these debates. As a member of the second generation, which was born in Weimar Germany and emigrated to the United States as teens or young adults, he was an insider and outsider of both cultures. As a consequence, his often conflicting affiliations mirrored many of the clashes and challenges of the German-American alliance; his lifelong defense of American liberalism, his identification with German culture and his experiences in the Third Reich were often hard to combine.

So soon after the war, while international tensions multiplied once more during the Cold War, intellectuals’ revaluation of western culture took place at the intersection of individual experiences, cultural ideals, and political strategies, which defy a more traditional History of Ideas to their endeavors. Therefore, a biographical approach has been relevant in the examination of Gay’s thinking. Factors that further influenced the connections between Gay’s emigration and his scholarship were his acculturated background with its attachment to German culture, his experiences in the Third Reich and the difficulties of his emigration to the United States, his contacts to American and émigré intellectuals, McCarthyism and the student protests. Furthermore, Gay’s historical work was influenced by his friendships to Germans who stayed in Germany during the War, travels to Germany, his ongoing construction of narratives about his German past and the cultivation of his position as German-American émigré historian.

This dissertation intends to correct the historiography on Gay’s scholarship on two levels. First, it contradicts interpretations of the historian’s scholarship as a mere continuation of Weimar’s intellectual and cultural traditions. Second, it questions postulations that his defense of American liberalism and the Enlightenment was encouraged by a homogeneous idea of a western culture. These approaches often tend to perceive either his processing of trauma or a complacent acculturation as the driving force behind his historical career. Instead of focusing on the continuities of Weimar culture or
Cold War escalation, this dissertation claims that Gay’s scholarship reflects a process of active reinvention as Jewish German-American historian in exile. This insight draws on three central conclusions that stress the large oppositions in his dynamic construct of the West: between “Germany” and the “United States”, “ideas” and “ideology” and between “trauma” and “reinvention”.

Firstly, Gay’s work aimed to stimulate the European-American dialogue after the rise of National Socialism. As an insider into two cultures, he was particularly able to take up this mediating position. His American exile was not merely a break with his German past, but encouraged particular dynamics between his own attitudes towards and views on German and American culture: his “Americanization” coincided with a “Germanization” that evoked Weimar culture in America. So while scholars have often neglected the American context of his life and work, his emigration relatively early in his life shifts the attention to his experiences in the United States.

Secondly, Gay’s scholarship was grounded in a project to distinguish “western” ideas from ideology. The rise of European ideologies had frequently led to American scholars’ dismissal of theoretical construction, or their withdrawal into its rational domain. Therefore, through a historical approach Gay tried to define a moral identity for the postwar West, grounded in secularism, rationality and freedom, which had absorbed the “lessons” of the experience with National Socialism and avoided liberal mythmaking. This dialectical thinking, so central to his historical scholarship, has not been fully recognized in the reception of his work.

Thirdly, Gay’s writing of “memory” and “history” did not represent traditional oppositions. We have seen that his historical approach stirred his development of individual memory, which had often been repressed by the polarizations around his German-Jewish identity. His writing of history involved an act of resistance against the broader political currents that threatened to drown the complexities of his position as acculturated Jew in the Third Reich. Therefore, relationship between his memory and his historical work was not exclusively defined by his “trauma” or his repression of his confrontation with National Socialism. Instead, his historical work stimulated a complex process of individualization in exile. At the same time, he more and more legitimized his historical work on the liberal tradition in the context of his individual memory of the Third Reich.
1. Germany and the United States

Gay’s perspective on western culture rooted in an instable German-American comparison. His views on the German-American relationship were grounded in his particular experiences as second-generation émigré historian. These émigrés, which included eminent historians such as George Mosse and Fritz Stern, infused their reverence for American liberalism with their increasing re-appreciation of some German intellectual and cultural traditions. This process involved close interactions between Gay’s views on German and American culture.

The second generation differed from the first émigré generation, because its relationship to Germany was for an important part developed in American exile, where it took most of its education. Initially, German crimes sparked Gay’s admiration for the United States. While lots of prominent émigré intellectuals were forced to leave Nazi Germany in 1933, his parents’ relative invisibility made it initially less imperative to leave. Consequently, the more than five years that he spent in the Third Reich shaped his attitudes towards the country. Only in 1939 the Gays managed to escape to Cuba, where they stayed for two years before entering the United States. During these years the young émigré idealized the values of rationality, individuality and freedom of American culture, which mirrored the values of the tradition of his German-Jewish background. When after 1945 he couldn’t escape the news about the Holocaust, his early emigration furnished his more resolute rejection of German culture than many older émigrés’. While those émigrés preserved closer ties to the culture in which they had established their careers, his emigration relatively early in his life provided him with the ability and willingness to absorb American culture and develop a fluency in English. The second generation’s often successful emigration shaped its reluctance to define itself as a group of victims; instead, they perceived themselves decidedly as “Americans”.

Still, the second generation’s exile did not prevent their strong ties to the country that had expelled it. The period of Gay’s complete rejection of German culture ended after a few years through his reading of German émigrés’ writings. Yet his breaks with German culture, first physically and then mentally, so early in his intellectual development established the dynamics of his thinking about western culture: American liberalism remained the main point of reverence from which he undertook his rapprochement with German culture. At the same time, the brevity of his break with German culture implied that his integration into American culture coincided with a slow embrace of the German tradition of Bildung. Therefore, since the
beginning of his intellectual development American and German intellectual and cultural traditions have interacted in complex ways that rejected radical contrasts or parallels.

While a radical view on the German Sonderweg molded many American intellectuals’ thinking, the American context did not merely conflict with, but often facilitated Gay’s adoption of German traditions. Already in Denver, where he first landed, he started to read the works of émigré intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse, who defended German culture against the American Sonderweg thesis. In this polarized climate, Gay would increasingly ameliorate his rebuff of all German culture. In 1946 his move to Columbia University in New York encouraged a more nuanced perspective on the German-American relationship. His access to networks of mainly leftist Weimar intellectuals placed the idea of a “good” Germany of his German-Jewish upbringing on a more sophisticated level. In the early 1950s two members of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse and Franz Neumann, who both played an essential role in his intellectual development, sparked his interest in Freud. Psychoanalysis convinced him that western culture should be grounded in the values of secularism and rationality, acknowledging both the rational and irrational parts of human nature. Moreover, the popular concept of western civilization in postwar American academia assisted his growing ability to partially overcome his early inclination to contrast German and western culture. The comparative view on European history shaped American historical scholarship to a larger degree than the more national approach of European historians, which motivated his own endeavor to explore both the connections and conflicts between German and American culture. More than a political approach, a focus on ideas, psychology and culture allowed him to create complex analogies that reflected his own distance to and empathy with the German past.

The rise of McCarthyism in the 1950s kindled Gay’s realization that German culture did not just represent an isolation from politics, but could also be mobilized in the battle against many intellectuals’ cultivation of the opposition between anti-intellectualist “American” culture and “European” ideology. While the young émigré’s support of the United States stimulated questioning of German traditions, his experiences with National Socialism also made him a close observer of segregation and populism. Émigrés’ discussion about the link between “morality” and “reality”, which was first discussed by the eighteenth-century philosophes, provided him with fresh insights into the necessity of theoretical reflection in the postwar re-definition of western moral identity. The central connection between “morality” and
“reality” also fuelled Gay’s and others’ interpretations of German intellectuals’ lack of political reality: Weimar intellectuals’ failure was not only the result of radicalism, but also of their inability to create inspiring democratic symbols. Postwar American intellectuals’ own struggle to re-define American culture as part of the transatlantic alliance, strengthened Gay’s awareness that liberalism could be connected to a cultural identity, instead of being the exclusive domain of National Socialist ideologists. The American context, therefore, helped to preserve such concepts after the rise of ideology.

Like many Weimar intellectuals, American intellectuals were often pessimistic about Western liberalism, which often appeared bleak in comparison to the ideologies that had mobilized the masses. In the 1950s McCarthyism motivated much research into “American fascism” that attacked liberal, rather than German, traditions. Although Gay shared much of émigré and American intellectuals’ disapproval of mass culture, he maintained his conviction that German history represented the worse example of populism. His views on the Cold War were largely defined by the Second World War, upholding his view of the right as the main enemy, while some other influential German émigrés were eager to shift their attention to the struggle against the Soviet Union. Under the influence of Geistesgeschichte, his contacts to American historians like Richard Hofstadter, and psychoanalysis’ emphasis on human nature, his thinking about western culture certainly had a conservative streak. But he was not so absorbed by the battle against communism as to completely forsake a leftist belief in social change that other (ex-Marxist) intellectuals more readily abandoned. Therefore, his emigration relatively early in his life permitted his delicate connections between various (European and American, conservative and leftist) intellectual traditions that were in Europe often separated. Although American intellectuals’ battles between a defense of and attacks on German culture, a support of the transatlantic relationship and theories of American exceptionalism, anti-communism and anti-anti-communism, were fierce, they were not as violent as the twentieth-century European clash of ideology. While many, often ex-Marxist, first-generation émigrés (born around 1900) and American intellectuals found it hard to muster enthusiasm for a post-ideological West, the catastrophic results of ideological thinking and insights into American culture inspired Gay’s moderate worldview at the beginning of his intellectual development. As a consequence, his defense of the political center resonated in his scholarship. In his biography of the German socialist Eduard Bernstein, he connected socialism to liberalism; in his work on the Enlightenment, he reclaims “romantic”
irrationality for the liberal party, while in his work on German-Jewish history he forged connections between Germans and Jews.

However, Gay’s in many respects successful emigration endowed his victimhood with a particular character. His process of individualization in exile was a complicated affair, threatened by the dominant political events of his own time that polarized his Jewish German-American background. He had suffered from the Nazis, while he had not resisted them, not even as part of the American army; he was an insider but, consequently, also an outsider of two cultures: he was neither Weimar intellectual nor American-born. His confrontation with National Socialism left deep scars, while many others had had more to endure. In sum, his inarticulate position between two cultures seemed a feeble basis for a moral identity. Nevertheless, it was exactly this position “in the middle” that he cultivated in his thinking about western morality, which rooted in his comparative European-American perspective rather than in static ideas. Since the 1950s his advocacy of a transatlantic Enlightenment had been grounded in his effort to educate elites preventing future war and ideology. His narrative of the Enlightenment epitomized his idea of the “American-European symbiosis”: it provided the United States with a critical and inspiring past, while the American liberal example showed that a democratic western identity was possible. So although the Enlightenment originated in Europe and found its most successful realization in the United States, his development of Cassirer’s functionalist approach to ideas contradicted radical contrasts between “European” theory and “American” practice.

2. Ideas and Ideology

Gay’s transatlantic idea of western culture paired a mistrust of radicalism to a rejection of moral relativism, which sparked his project to distinguish “ideas” that bolstered western culture from destructive ideology. According to the historian, abstract ideological thinking could be averted by re-establishing links between man’s experiences and ideas. Already in his 1952 biography of Bernstein, published when he was still a political theorist, his historical approach explored the ties of the German socialist’s revisionist ideas to his political strategies and his personality. His interest in a historical perspective was encouraged by many American intellectuals’ loss of belief in its contemporary significance. Ironically, this happened at a time when émigré thought permeated American culture.
Therefore, Gay perceived that American intellectuals’ enthusiastic adoption of émigré social theory to formulate their pessimism about western culture, or their theories of American exceptionalism, separated ideas from the context in which they originated. So although he advocated transatlantic exchange, he also warned his public that parts of European culture had contributed to the rise of authoritarianism. Yet instead of highlighting ideas’ fateful effects, he chose, fuelled by personal needs and experiences, to examine what ideas had “worked” in the European past, stimulating liberal democracy.

Although Gay believed that German intellectual and cultural traditions were a cause of the rise of ideology, he also perceived that their development provided a way to bolster contested modernity. In American scholarship the balance between subjectivity and objectivity of German historicist traditions was often unknown or misunderstood, resulting in either historical relativism or a more exclusive emphasis on the rational quality of ideas. But after finishing his dissertation, Gay became less convinced of the power of theoretical explanation. German scholars such as Neumann, Cassirer and Erich Panofsky provided him with the tools to analyze historical experience without losing sight of the universal meaning of ideas. These émigrés made him aware that ideas’ significance was constructed in a dialectic between their function in the past and the present.

Therefore, in *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist* (1959) Gay put Voltaire’s informed campaign for the values of the Enlightenment—freedom, tolerance and reason of law—at the center of his view on the Enlightenment. During the accelerating Cold War, Voltaire provided a keen example of a “propagandist” that rooted his battle in his own experiences and observations. Certain continuities between the eighteenth-century *philosophes* and the Middle Ages induced other historians to question their secular beliefs. In Gay’s synthesis of the period, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1967) and *The Science of Freedom* (1969), his exploration of their cultural “style”, an amalgam of their experiences, intentions and ideas, helped to define the Enlightenment in its universal conflict between rationality and irrationality that offered no fixed model for the present. Rather than a set of ideas, it was the *philosophes’* style of thinking, which put everything open to criticism, that determined its contemporary relevance.
The largely looming example of isolated German intellectuals, however, urged Gay to develop German historicism in order to tie its cultural definitions of the Enlightenment more closely to the historical context in his “social history of ideas”. In the 1950s this approach became more and more infused by psychoanalysis, which he perceived as its “logical” extension. Especially Weimar Culture (1968), The Rise of Modern Paganism and The Science of Freedom, which showed his aim to create cultural synthesis, were justified by psychoanalytical insights. Freud especially helped him to define more collective historical experiences. The philosophes’ formative experience, which fuelled their pursuit of modernity, was put in a dialectical model: their education in the classics was infused with the eighteenth-century rise of sciences that encouraged them to develop the ancients’ critical, secular attitudes; the philosophes’ “identity crisis”, due to their loss of belief in religion, formed the catalyst of this development.

While he initially relied more on theory, Gay’s scholarship in the 1960s did not only reveal his fear that his cultural definitions lapsed into mythmaking, but also a fresh confidence about his own campaign for the Enlightenment. His scholarship was shaped by his setting up of a campaign to spread his views. In this sense, his historical career was modelled after the philosophes’ self-fashioning as critical “outsiders” and responsible “insiders”, who took care of the political significance of their work. Similarly, Gay’s campaign did not contradict his project to create anti-ideological narratives of western culture, while it consciously historicized his own work. In his view, identity and objectivity were not necessarily contradictions, but they could reinforce one another. Subjectivity could lead to objectivity if it allowed him to observe things that others couldn’t. A condition was that the historian needed to construct an identity in his writings that explicitly stated his worldview. In the end, the historian’s self-fashioning would prove its value in interactions with other historians’ views. Therefore, Gay’s historization of his own work made his dialectical views on the eighteenth century the antithesis of Adorno and Horkheimer’s influential criticism of modernity in Dialectics of Enlightenment (1944). Contrary to these philosophers’ perspectives, his dialectical approach to the eighteenth century absorbed a questioning of its own construction in its use of two traditionally often conflicting intellectual traditions, German historicism and the philosophes’ moral realism, which enacted the historical battle of ideas in his narrative. His open partiality for the Enlightenment stirred
the debate about the past, which enlarged its objectivity. In his work, therefore, the question of the past’s objectivity became more consciously a matter of the present.

In the 1960s, Gay’s views became more and more disputed by the New Left, which attacked his defense of the transatlantic West, his intellectual-cultural approach to history and his support of gradual change. Tensions escalated between the generation that grew up during the Second World War and the one that was educated during the Cold War. In the 1950s, Gay’s transatlantic perspective had facilitated a more cosmopolitan western culture in its inclusion of German intellectual traditions and irrationality. But the New Left regarded his work of the West mainly as an imperialist entity. Although in the second half of the 1960s the historian continued to perceive right-winged extremism as the main enemy, instead of becoming a Cold Warrior, his suspicion of radicalization and emphasis on stability and a degree of authority was stronger than his identification with parts of the protesters’ program. His dismissal of ideological thinking included his rejection of the protesters’ identification with Third World movements; his dialectics between the “outsider” and “insider” implied that the protesters should recognize that they were part of the same western traditions that they criticized, instead of abandoning responsibility. But while the complexity of the historian’s work was often muddled against these new polarizations, it was evident that he himself often failed to avoid the position of the isolated intellectual and live up to the model of the distant outsider.

Gay’s conflict with the protest movement resonated in Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider. In this work he rejected the parallels between leftist Weimar intellectuals’ political fight against the oppressive state and the protests of the 1960s. Therefore, Weimar Culture can be seen as a cultural counter-narrative to both the celebration of leftist Weimar intellectuals’ politics and (American and German) “anti-intellectual” radicalism. His evocation of Weimar’s style broadened the idea of the republic’s culture, highlighting its achievements and its shortcomings in comparison to American liberal culture. More than the political polarization of the period 1919-1933, Gay believed that the last part of the more peaceful nineteenth century with its birth of the Weimar’s cultural glory and political imperialism contained more instructive lesson for postwar western intellectuals.
Ultimately, this induced him to shift his focus to the examination of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, which is beyond the scope of this research project.

Critical acclaim of Gay’s work coincided with a disapproval from many different corners: accusations of “hyper-objectivism” stood next to a criticism of his partiality and the many strategies in his work. His role-reversal between the outsider and the insider often confused the reception of his writings. His revisionist stance, in which he habitually positioned himself opposite tendencies in historical scholarship, rationalized the practice of historical writing to a degree that estranged other historians who preferred to present their narratives more “objectively”. While he defended the liberal master narrative in American scholarship, his use of psychoanalysis has certainly helped to define his position as critical outsider, but alienated many colleagues from his work.¹⁰¹⁰ Still, Gay himself felt much intellectual kinship with his former student Mark S. Micale, whose book *Hysterical Men. The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illnesses* (2008) developed its own connections between history and psychoanalysis. At the end of his life he noted that he did not correspond with any of his students.

### 3. Trauma and Reinvention

Gay’s memory of his experiences as acculturated Jew in the Third Reich deeply shaped his historical work. It influenced his choice of topics and his methodology. His processing and explanation of his and his parents’ acculturated position in the Third Reich resonates in many of his writings. Countering views that associated Jewish acculturation with cowardice, he connected it to the *philosophes*’ ability to reinvent themselves. Increasingly, his self-fashioning as émigré historian represented and explained the tension between “history” and “memory” in his work.

Since 1945, Gay more or less actively engaged with his memory of his experiences in the Third Reich. American and émigré intellectuals’ large-scale attacks on the liberal tradition related the ideals of both his German-Jewish background and the American savior to the causes of twentieth-century crime and ideological disaster. This endowed his defense of the Enlightenment with a moral

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¹⁰¹⁰ Although Gay had grown close to R.R. Palmer during his work on the Enlightenment, they saw less of each other after he moved to Yale. According to Gay, Palmer could not appreciate the “eccentric Freudianism that I preached and practiced.” “A Life of Learning”, 4.
urgency, because he recognized the German-Jewish victim in it. After his encounters with German
émigrés in the 1940s and 1960s, his friendships with Germans who stayed in Germany during the war,
notably the German historian Karl Dietrich Bracher and his wife, first opened him up to the German
perspective and helped him to connect his German past to his position as American. Together with his
research of Weimar Culture, they compelled him to adopt a cultural German identity that offered an
alternative, more empowering narrative than the German crimes that had disrupted his life. His
German and American identities were more confidently related by his realization that his acculturated
background with its attachment to German culture had anticipated his successful integration into
American culture. Although since the 1960s Jews’ attachment to German culture was heavily
criticized, he now associated acculturation with a resistance against others’ definitions of himself,
creative self-invention and the hope that relations between “outsiders” and “insiders” would improve
in the future.

In the 1970s Gay’s dialectical thinking implied that his own recent experiences with Germans
aided his defense of the German-Jewish symbiosis in the past. In his earlier work, his wish to escape
reading the past from the perspective of the Holocaust, which echoed his own resistance against
others’ definition of his Jewishness, had mostly led to his neglect of the German-Jewish dimension of
his work. But his further rapprochement with (some) Germans enabled him to make more credible
connections between his defense of the enlightened tradition and the German-Jewish tradition of
Bildung. His limiting reluctance to deal extensively with anti-Semitism also facilitated his construction
of narratives that made his work relevant to postwar Jewish intellectuals who wanted to learn from,
but not be absorbed by, the experience with National Socialism. Instead of defining a “Jewish
identity”, Gay’s dialectical approach justified his defense of the German-Jewish symbiosis in a
broader sense, as well: the German acceptance of the Jewish “outsider” would fuel its own integration
into the larger European concept.

While Gay’s identification with German culture was mainly limited to the period before 1933,
his friendship with a former friend of his father’s, Emil Busse, together with his psychoanalytical
training, encouraged a process of integrating his experiences in the Third Reich into his self-
perception as German-American. Although he was convinced that the complexity of his own story had
a broader significance explaining why Jews were hesitant to leave the Third Reich, he did not want his perspective on the period to be understood as an apology of German crimes. In his historical work a topic such as the Enlightenment eventually compelled him to construct a cultural-psychological synthesis, but he was not willing, or able, to give up any historical complexities in his writing about the Third Reich. So although Gay wrote several drafts of his early memories in the 1980s, the Historikerstreit probably delayed the publication of his own more complicated account of his experiences until 1997.

In his memoirs psychoanalysis aided Gay’s reconstruction of more ambivalent daily experiences in the period between 1933 and 1939. This recovery of historical complexity helped him to liberate a sense of individuality that had been frequently crushed by the polarizations between “victims” and “perpetrators” that surrounded his position as Jewish German-American historian. Therefore, psychoanalytical insights, combined with historical research, did not just contrast with, but rather recovered his individual memory. At the same time, his memoirs did not hide the strains of his parents’ radical secularism and self-proclaimed representation of the “good” Germany. My German Question’s explicit attack on views that condemned Jews’ hesitance to leave Nazi Germany avoided historical relativism and enabled him to blur the borders between “victims” and “perpetrators”, as well. Jews’ attachment to German culture contained many problematic elements, notably its discrimination of East-European Jews. This criticism of the liberal tradition was no revocation of his earlier work, but explained his own project to define a center that rejected both rigid rationality and boundless irrationality.

My German Question dramatized this central battle against extremes in Gay’s scholarship. Therefore, his memoirs’ almost exclusive focus on his experiences in the Third Reich illuminates the emotional roots of his scholarship. My German Question is the culmination of his efforts to explain his early project to reinvent “American” hope in a transatlantic, western context. He justified his scholarship in two different ways: through a “westernization” of German culture, which sometimes obscured its German roots though, and a “Germanization” of his research of the liberal tradition by connecting it to his own position as German-American émigré. In this way, his work created its own transatlantic center.
This research clarifies the roots and relevance of Gay’s scholarship in postwar American scholarship, endowing the defense of the center with urgency after the rise of ideologies. His biography provides insights into émigrés’ “liberal” construction of German history in the United States. While this scholarship has often been attacked, the case of Gay shows that it did not merely advocate liberal standardization. Instead, it was rooted in endeavors to counter intellectuals’ often flawed but influential analogies between the German past and the American present, which many other historians refused to elaborate on. The examination of Gay’s work points to the postwar battles between American and émigré intellectuals; the canon of émigré thought, which included Hannah Arendt and Theodor W. Adorno, had yet to be established. He explicitly positioned himself in this debate, trying to mediate between both European and American flaws and achievements. This approach aided his creation of narratives of European history in which postwar intellectuals could recognize themselves without lapsing into pessimism about western culture. Therefore, his focus on periods before 1933 invited more delicate connections between western self-criticism and western identity.

Gay’s refusal to perceive the Holocaust as the center of European history, shortly after the event itself, certainly had its limitations. His personal need to master his traumatic experiences in the Third Reich and to create a more “positive” German identity, stimulated a wish to normalize German-Jewish relations in a time when its excesses had not yet been fully discussed. He increasingly came to explain the complexities of this personal dimension of his historical research. For this reason, his project might often be more appealing in our time; the identification of this second-generation émigré with and distance to the controversial German past reflects in many ways our own. His work reminds us that the “West” is a more dynamic construct than many Cold Warriors and leftist historians of the 1960s alike have often realized. He endowed the political center with a historical imagination that in its focus on the right as the main enemy underlines the diversity of cultures of conservatism. The political aspects of his work might sometimes seem dated, but he himself was the first to acknowledge that historians should continue providing new inspiring images of western culture. In the middle of new polarizations between western culture and the rest of the world, we are more ready to explore what this émigré perceived right after 1945, that even a post-ideological, democratic West should root in a strong identity, grounded in self-criticism and an effort
to understand the other party. To this aim, Gay did not put the Holocaust but tough hope at the heart of it.
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Summary

Transatlantic Enlightenment: Peter Gay and the Drama of German History in the United States, 1930s-1970s

This first extensive research of Peter Gay’s life (1923-2015) and work examines the impact of the historian’s emigration from Nazi Germany to the United States on his defense of the contested idea of western culture at the beginning of the Cold War. It explores the interactions between his experiences, scholarship and memory of the Third Reich from the 1930s to the 1970s. In this period of intense transatlantic exchange his emigration to the United States and his partial and never completed return to German culture reflected broader tensions of the German-American relationship during the early Cold War. This research intends to correct the historiography on Gay’s scholarship on two levels. First, it contradicts interpretations of the historian’s scholarship as merely a continuation of Weimar’s intellectual and cultural traditions. Second, it questions postulations that his idea of western culture was the result of his Cold War politics. These approaches tend to perceive either his processing of trauma or a complacent acculturation as the driving force behind his historical career.

Chapter I, “Evaluating Exile”, shows that Gay’s perspective on western culture was grounded in an instable German-American comparison. It argues that his views on the German-American relationship were influenced by his particular experiences as second-generation émigré historian, which made him an insider, but also an outsider of German and American culture. His acculturated Jewish background fuelled his strong ties to German cultural traditions. Yet his break with German culture so early in his intellectual development established close dynamics between his integration into American culture and partial return to German culture in his thinking about western culture. American liberalism and German intellectual and cultural traditions were contrasted and connected in multiple ways that defied Manichaean thinking. The concept of western culture, which was popular in postwar American academia, was a way to negotiate the tensions between German and American culture. His access to networks of mainly leftist German émigré intellectuals, such as Franz Neumann and Herbert Marcuse, placed the idea of a “good” Germany, which shaped his stance in the Third Reich, on a more
sophisticated level, including the acknowledgement of the rational and irrational parts of human nature. Contrary to many members of the first generation of émigré historians and American intellectuals in New York, his support of western culture as a liberal center was sustained by his early awareness of the danger of radicalism and the flaws and achievements of both German and American culture. While many, often ex-Marxist, first-generation émigrés and American intellectuals found it hard to embrace a post-ideological West, the catastrophic results of ideological thinking inspired Gay’s moderate worldview at the beginning of his intellectual development.

The second Chapter, “American ‘Lessons’ from German History”, discusses Gay’s early endeavors to create narratives that inspired an idea of western culture to prevent future war and ideology. It analyzes his dissertation about the German socialist Eduard Bernstein (1952) against the background of American and émigré intellectuals’ search for the significance of the German past for postwar western culture. While historical syntheses were still lacking, the polarizations about the German past often undermined western liberalism, stirring both excessive pessimism or theories of American exceptionalism. The popularity of a rigid idea of the German Sonderweg compelled many émigré intellectuals to defend German intellectual and cultural traditions. This chapter argues that Gay’s dissertation reflected his aim to encourage a more constructive exchange between the American present and the German past: while the socialist’s eye for the political context in many ways mirrored the “American” emphasis on practice, German theoretical traditions countered American anti-intellectualism and exceptionialism. So although he believed that German intellectual and cultural traditions were a cause of the rise of ideology, he also perceived that they provided a way to strengthen the contested idea of modernity. The rise of National Socialism reminded postwar intellectuals that liberalism was not self-evident. The central link between “morality” and “reality” in Gay’s thinking implied that Weimar intellectuals’ failure was not only the result of radicalism, but also of their inability to create inspiring democratic symbols. However, in the course of the 1950s, McCarthyism and the mobilization of American universities in the Cold War brought new challenges. American intellectuals’ polarizations, together with a widespread loss of belief that historical explanations could provide meaningful narratives for the present, stirred Gay’s doubts about the relevance of his theoretical approach.
The third Chapter, “Lies and Enlightenment”, analyzes Gay’s endeavors halfway through the 1950s to construct a meaningful narrative of the Enlightenment that did not reduce it to another “myth” of modernity. This chapter first provides an outline of the postwar debate about the contested legacy of the eighteenth in the twentieth century, which was often perceived as the culprit of twentieth-century war and ideology. German Geistesgeschichte provided Gay with the tools to analyze the philosophes’ “style”, an amalgam of their experiences, attitudes and ideas, while emphasizing the universal meaning of their ideas in *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist* (1959) and his later synthesis of the period. His focus on Voltaire’s campaign for the values of the Enlightenment – freedom, tolerance and reason of law– provided a keen example of a “propagandist” that rooted his campaign in his own observations and experiences. In this way, he integrated irrationality into the view of the Enlightenment. While in postwar Europe cultural research was frequently associated with National Socialist mythmaking, he thus endowed his cultural approach to a liberal cause. Contrary to many American intellectuals, the historian’s campaign stood out because it reflected a transatlantic imagination that defied American exceptionalism. The largely looming example of the “unpolitical” German intellectuals, however, urged Gay to develop German historicism. In his “social history of ideas”, he tied his cultural definitions of the Enlightenment more closely to the historical context. In the 1950s this approach became more and more infused by psychoanalysis.

Chapter IV, “The Battle on Weimar”, explores Gay’s complex reactions to leftist radicalism during the student protests in the 1960s, which provided a completely new challenge than his battle against the Right. The New Left attacked his defense of western culture, his intellectual-cultural approach to history and his support of gradual change. In the 1950s Gay’s transatlantic perspective had facilitated a more cosmopolitan western culture in its inclusion of German intellectual and cultural traditions and irrationality. But the New Left did not recognize his observation of the battle of ideas at the center of the West, but regarded his idea of western culture mainly as an “imperialist” entity. Although in the second half of the 1960s the historian continued to perceive right-winged extremism as the main enemy, instead of becoming a Cold Warrior, his suspicion of radicalization was stronger than his identification with parts of the protesters’ program. While the complexity of the historian’s work was often muddled against these new polarizations, it was evident that he himself often failed to
avoid the position of the isolated intellectual and live up to the model of the distant outsider. His book *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (1968) can be seen as a cultural counter-narrative to both the celebration of leftist Weimar intellectuals’ politics and “American”, “anti-intellectual” radicalism. In his connections of Weimar’s “style” to the end of the nineteenth century and the American liberal present, he disputed views that perceived the German past exclusively from the perspective of the Third Reich, which could only alienate postwar intellectuals to identify with Weimar’s intellectual and cultural achievements. More than Weimar’s political polarization, Gay believed that the last part of the more peaceful nineteenth century with its birth of the Republic’s cultural glory and political imperialism contained more instructive lesson for postwar western intellectuals. Ultimately, this induced him to shift his focus to the examination of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. At the same time, his book, like his earlier work, absorbed the “lessons” of the German past that demanded both his rejection of radicalism and need for inspiring symbols for the West. Gay’s project to create anti-ideological narratives, which reinforced transatlantic western culture, increasingly encouraged his cultivation of “perspectival realism” that historicized his own work. A condition for these dynamics between the subjectivity and objectivity of historical writing was that the historian needed to construct an identity in his writings that explicitly stated his worldview. Ultimately, the historian’s self-fashioning would prove its value in interactions with other historians’ views. In his work, therefore, identity and objectivity were no oppositions but strengthened each other.

Finally, the last chapter, “History and Memory”, examines the relationship between Gay’s own memory of the Third Reich and his historical scholarship. It claims that both his memory of his experiences as acculturated Jew in Nazi Germany and emigration deeply shaped his historical work. His own lucky escape of the Nazis and embeddedness in American culture resisted exploring the past exclusively from the perspective of the Holocaust, but stimulated a focus on man’s achievements. Initially driven by more resolute contrasts between Germany and the United States, he managed to connect his defense of the Enlightenment to his own ambivalent experiences. In the 1960s his friendships with Germans who stayed in Germany during the war, notably Karl Dietrich Bracher, first opened him up to the German perspective. These contacts, together with his research of *Weimar Culture*, compelled him to adopt an alternative, more empowering cultural German identity. His
German and American identities were more confidently related by his realization that his acculturated background with its attachment to German culture had anticipated his successful integration into American culture. His dialectical thinking between the past and the present implied his belief that his own need for this more constructive identity, which was not defined by National Socialism, did not contrast with his experience with anti-Semitism; it rather stimulated the debate about the German past.

In the 1970s Gay’s dialectical thinking entailed that his own recent experiences with Germans justified a defense of the German-Jewish symbiosis in the past. Previously he had mostly neglected the German-Jewish dimension that was in fact present in much of his work. But now his own experiences allowed credible connections between his defense of the enlightened tradition and the German-Jewish tradition of Bildung. Moreover, instead of defining a “Jewish identity”, Gay’s dialectical approach justified his defense of the German-Jewish symbiosis through its essential function in the present: the German acceptance of the Jewish “outsider” would fuel its own integration into the larger European concept. While in *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* his identification with German culture was mainly limited to the period before 1933, his friendship with a former friend of his father’s, Emil Busse, together with his psychoanalytical training, encouraged a process of integrating his experiences in the Third Reich into his self-perception as German-American. In his memoirs psychoanalysis aided his reconstruction of his more ambivalent experiences in the period between 1933 and 1939. His psychoanalytical approach in his memoirs *My German Question* (1998), which he started to write at the beginning of the 1980s, partly blurred the borders between “victims” and “perpetrators”. This endowed his position as second-generation émigré with a new moral responsibility, while it underlined the burden of his German-Jewish upbringing. This recovery of historical complexity helped Gay to liberate a sense of individuality that had been frequently crushed by the polarizations about German-Jewish history. “History” and individual “memory”, therefore, do not represent traditional oppositions in his thinking.

Instead of focusing on the continuities of Weimar culture or Cold War escalation, this dissertation claims that Gay’s scholarship reflected a process of active reinvention as Jewish German-American historian in exile. This insight draws on three central conclusions that stress the large oppositions in
his dynamic construct of the West: between “Germany” and the “United States”, “ideas” and “ideology” and between “trauma” and “reinvention”. Firstly, Gay developed his idea of western culture as the result of his experiences as German-American second-generation émigré. While scholars have often neglected the American context of his life and work, his emigration relatively early in his life shifts the attention to his experiences in the United States. The close interactions between his views on German and American culture endowed his scholarship with particular dynamics: his integration into American culture formed a break with his German education, but also facilitated his adoption of German intellectual and cultural traditions.

Secondly, German intellectual and cultural traditions and the “lessons” of the rise of National Socialism assisted Gay’s endeavor to revitalize an idea of transatlantic western culture. This research maintains that this dialectical thinking has not been fully recognized in the reception of his work. His development of the historicist tension between universality and particularity, together with its research of irrationality, helped him to construct liberal European narratives in which postwar intellectuals could recognize themselves. At the beginning of the Cold War, when historical writing was often questioned, these narratives provided postwar intellectual debates with a historical outlook. They reminded intellectuals that western culture was rooted in the tensions between the European-American relationship, irrational and irrational elements, but was defined by its ongoing campaign against authoritarianism. In these narratives Gay’s explicit support of American liberalism limited his view on the past, but also facilitated his idea of western culture through his inclusion of irrationality. His liberal “style” consciously historicized his work, which prevented him from lapsing into mythmaking. This dialectical thinking, so central to his historical scholarship, has not been fully recognized in the reception of his work. This dialectical thinking, so central to his historical scholarship, has not been fully recognized in the reception of his work.

Thirdly, Gay’s idea of western culture was infused by the memory of his experiences as acculturated Jew in the Third Reich. The relationship between his memory and his historical work was not exclusively defined by his trauma or his repression of his confrontation with National Socialism. Instead, it represented the processing of the tension between his experiences with National Socialism and his lucky escape to the United States. Both his “trauma” and “reinvention” urged him to write
historical narratives that provided a western identity that liberated him from the historical polarizations that shaped, and often deformed his individual memory. These liberating narratives continued to develop under the influence of his postwar experiences in the United States and Germany. His dialectical thinking, therefore, defied more traditional oppositions between “memory” and “history”.
Nederlandse samenvatting

Dit is het eerste uitgebreide onderzoek naar het leven en werk van de joodse Duits-Amerikaanse historicus Peter Gay (1923-2015). Het onderzoek analyseert de relatie tussen Gays ervaring van emigratie uit Nazi-Duitsland en zijn verdediging van een idee van westerse cultuur aan het begin van de Koude Oorlog. Het proefschrift richt zich vooral op de verbanden tussen zijn ervaringen, wetenschappelijke werk en zijn herinnering aan het Derde Rijk in de periode tussen de jaren ’30 en de jaren ’70 van de twintigste eeuw. In deze tijd van intensieve trans-Atlantische uitwisseling representeerde Gays emigratie en zijn gedeeltelijke terugkeer naar Duitsland de spanningen in de Duits-Amerikaanse relatie tijdens in de eerste decennia van de Koude Oorlog.

Dit proefschrift corrigeert de bestaande historiografie over Gays werk op twee verschillende niveaus. Ten eerste weerlegt het de interpretatie dat zijn werk een voortzetting was van Weimars roemruchte intellectuele en culturele tradities, die vooral sinds de jaren ’30 door Duitse emigranten in de Verenigde Staten verspreid raakten. Ten tweede toont dit onderzoek dat het idee van westerse cultuur niet gezien kan worden als het resultaat van zijn politieke engagement tijdens de Koude Oorlog. Deze interpretaties zien vaak het “trauma” van zijn ervaringen met nationaalsocialisme of een sterke assimilatie in de Amerikaanse cultuur, waarbij zijn ervaringen met antisemitisme onderdrukt werden, als de drijvende kracht achter zijn historische carrière.

Hoofdstuk I, “Evaluating Exile”, toont dat een vergelijking tussen Duitse en Amerikaanse geschiedenis en cultuur ten grondslag lag aan Gays idee van de westerse cultuur. Deze vergelijking was niet statisch, maar veranderde onder invloed van zijn eigen ervaringen en naoorlogse ontwikkelingen in Duitse en Amerikaanse politiek en cultuur. Dit hoofdstuk stelt tevens dat zijn specifieke ervaringen als historicus van de tweede generatie Duitse emigranten (geboren in de Weimar Republiek) van grote invloed was op zijn visie op de Duits-Amerikaanse relatie. Zijn emigratie als tiener, waardoor hij het grootste gedeelte van zijn opleiding in de Verenigde Staten volgde, leidde ertoe dat Gay zowel sterke banden met de Amerikaanse als met de Duitse cultuur kon ontwikkelen.
Zijn geassimileerde joods-Duitse achtergrond impliceerde dat hij sterke banden met de Duitse cultuur bleef onderhouden, ondanks dat Geistesgeschichte door de opkomst van het nationaal-socialisme controversieel geworden was. Wel versterkte zijn kortstondige verwerping van de hele Duitse cultuur in 1945, toen het nieuws over de Holocaust niet meer te negeren was, zijn integratie in de Amerikaanse cultuur. In New York, waar hij zijn studie politieke theorie voortzette, werd hij onderdeel van netwerken van (linkse) Duitse emigranten van de eerste generatie, zoals Franz Neumann en Herbert Marcuse. Deze intellectuelen voorzagen het idee van het “goede” Duitsland, dat hij ook in Nazi Duitsland had gecultiveerd, van een theoretische inkadering, die rigide tegenstellingen tussen de “irrationele” Duitse en “rationele” Amerikaanse cultuur weersprak. Zij beïnvloedden zijn langzame en nooit voltooide terugkeer naar de Duitse cultuur; in veel opzichten bleef hij vasthouden aan een ideaalbeeld van Amerikaans liberalisme. Maar de Amerikaanse context bevorderde zijn terugkeer naar Duitsland ook. Het idee van “westerse cultuur”, dat vooral na de oorlog populair werd op Amerikaanse universiteiten, stimuleerde zijn eigen pogingen om de Duitse geschiedenis en Amerikaans liberalisme op een constructieve manier aan elkaar te relateren, zonder in simplificerende tegenstellingen te vervallen.

Op deze manier bracht Gays intellectuele ontwikkeling een sterke wisselwerking teweeg tussen zijn visies op de Duitse en Amerikaanse cultuur, die oog had voor zowel hun zwaktes als verworvenheden. Terwijl de Verenigde Staten Duitse intellectuelen liet zien dat een succesvolle democratie mogelijk was, toonden Duitse intellectuele tradities de gevaren van de cultivering van een “anti-intellectualistische” Amerikaanse identiteit. Deze dynamiek in zijn denken over westerse cultuur voorzag Gays verdediging van het liberale centrum van relevantie. Hierin onderscheidde zijn denken zich van de opstelling van veel Duitse emigranten van de eerste generatie (geboren rond 1900) en Amerikaanse intellectuelen. Terwijl Gays inzicht in de gevaren van radicaal denken zich aan het begin van zijn wetenschappelijke loopbaan ontwikkelde, waren deze intellectuelen vaak ex-Marxisten die het moeilijk vonden om warm te lopen voor een postideologisch idee van het Westen.

Het tweede hoofdstuk, “American ‘Lessons’ from German History”, onderzoekt Gays eerste pogingen om een anti-ideologisch narratief voor de westerse cultuur te creëren dat tegelijkertijd de intellectuele elite wist te mobiliseren. Het hoofdstuk analyseert met name Gays dissertatie over de
Duitse socialist Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) tegen de achtergrond van de zoektocht van Amerikaanse intellectuelen en Duitse emigranten over de betekenis van de opkomst van het nationaalsocialisme voor het idee van westere cultuur. De gepolariseerde discussie over het recente Duitse verleden in een tijd waarin het historische onderzoek naar de periode nog in de kinderschoenen stond, leidde vaak tot een pessimisme over de westere cultuur, of stimuleerde theorieën over Amerikaans exceptionalisme. Een rigide idee van een Duitse Sonderweg dat onder Amerikaanse intellectuelen populair was bracht Duitse emigranten van de eerste generatie, zoals Theodor Adorno en Hannah Arendt, ertoe om, net na de Tweede Wereldoorlog, vooral de “onschuld” van Duitse intellectuele tradities te bepleiten.

Dit hoofdstuk stelt dat in dit gepolariseerde klimaat Gays dissertatie over Bernstein tot doel had om de Duits-Amerikaanse intellectuele uitwisseling te bevorderen door de tegenstellingen tussen beide landen te nuanceren, zonder in historisch relativisme te vervallen. Bernsteins oog voor de relatie tussen socialistische theorie en de Duitse politieke realiteit leek in veel opzichten op “Amerikaans” pragmatisme. Tegelijkertijd benadrukte Gay in zijn boek het belang van theoretische definities een adequate manier waren om moreel relativisme te voorkomen dan de nijging van veel Amerikaanse intellectuelen om de Amerikaanse liberale identiteit tegen “Europese” ideologie af te zetten. Dus hoewel hij geloofde dat het isolement van Duitse intellectuelen ten opzichte van de politiek bijgedragen had aan de opkomst van de nationaalsocialistische ideologie, was hij eveneens van mening dat zij het idee van een trans-Atlantische westere moderniteit konden bevorderen. Bernsteins strijd tegen radicalen aan linker en rechterzijde herinnerde Amerikaanse intellectuelen eraan dat liberalisme niet vanzelfsprekend is, maar altijd strijdbaar moet zijn. De centrale relatie in Gays denken tussen “moreel” en “praktisch” denken leidde tot zijn inzicht dat de val van de Weimar Republiek niet alleen te wijten was aan radicalisme, maar ook aan een onvermogen om inspirerende democratische symbolen te creëren. Intellectuelen hebben volgens hem daarom de verantwoordelijkheid om deze liberale inspiratie te leveren.

Maar in aan het begin van de jaren ’50 leidde McCarthyisme en de mobilisering van universiteiten tijdens de Koude Oorlog Gays tot een verregaande politisering van de Amerikaanse cultuur, waarbij de grotere populariteit van ideeën over Amerikaans exceptionalisme de trans-
Atlantische relatie onder druk zetten. De “Cultural Cold War” en de theoretische werken van emigranten, brachten Gay in sterkere mate aan het twijfelen over de macht van ideeën. Amerikaanse intellectuelen maakten steeds meer gebruik maakten van de theoretische werken van emigranten zoals Adorno en Arendt. Maar een breed gedragen verlies in het geloof dat geschiedschrijving relevante oplossingen kon aandragen voor het heden maakte dat intellectuelen zich vaak niet verdiepten in de historische context waarin deze ideeën ontstonden.


Gays analyse van Voltaire’s campagne voor Verlichtingswaarden zette wederom de strijd tussen ideeën, in plaats van formele theorievorming, centraal. Voltaire representeerde Gays eigen opvattingen dat intellectuelen een isolement van de politiek moeten voorkomen, maar verantwoordelijk zijn voor de invloed van hun ideeën op de werkelijkheid. Voltaire bood volgens hem een voorbeeld voor de manier waarop intellectuelen hun theorieën moeten ontwikkelen in relatie tot hun eigen ervaringen en observaties. Hiermee ging Gay in tegen de wijdverspreide overtuiging dat de *philosophes* de ratio tot een nieuwe mythe hadden gemaakt, een idee dat volgens hem voortkwam uit
de lastercampagne van de Romantische tegenbeweging. De sterke relatie tussen idee en praktijk van de Verlichting definierte Voltaire’s strijd. Tegelijkertijd werd de traditionele tegenstelling tussen Romantiek en Verlichting hierdoor ook genuanceerd, omdat hij het denken van de *philosophes* weer met hun ervaringen en emoties verbond. Ook Voltaire zelf had zijn gedachtegoed vaak gessimplificeerd in zijn voortdurende strijd om invloed. Gays zorgvuldige analyse van Voltaire’s stijl diende er daarom zowel toe om de Verlichting te historiseren, als om de universele “essentie” van haar boodschap te belichten.

Terwijl een culturele benadering van ideeën, zeker in Europa, vaak met nationaalsocialistische mythevorming werd geassocieerd, verbond Gay die weer met westers liberalisme. Inspiratie hiervoor kwam ook van de centrale belangstelling van *New York Intellectuals* voor cultuur in hun herdefiniëring van de Amerikaanse positie als internationale voorvechter van de democratie. Maar in tegenstelling tot veel van deze intellectuelen bepleitte Gay een liberale, westerse identiteit die gegrond was in de Europees-Amerikaanse relatie. Desalniettemin voorkwam het schrikbeeld van de “onpolitieke” Duitser dat hij Duitse tradities kritiekloos overnam. In zijn “social history of ideas” probeerde de historicus ervoor te zorgen dat zijn culturele benadering van de geschiedenis in sterkere mate in de historische context verankerd werd. In de jaren ’50 maakte hij steeds meer gebruik van Freuds psychoanalyse om de relatie tussen ideeën en de menselijke psychologie te onderzoeken.

In de jaren ’60 vormde het linkse radicalisme een compleet nieuwe uitdaging voor Gays denken over westerse cultuur. Hoofdstuk IV, “The Battle on Weimar,” analyseert zijn complexe reactie op de studentenprotesten, die ingingen tegen zijn verdediging van westerse cultuur, zijn intellectuele-culturele geschiedschrijving en zijn geloof in graduale politieke en sociale verandering. In de jaren ’50 had zijn trans-Atlantische perspectief een meer kosmopolitisch alternatief geboden voor het populaire Amerikaans exceptionalisme. Maar de New Left onderkende zijn pogingen om de strijd tussen ideeën tot het centrum van de westerse cultuur te maken niet of nauwelijks. Hoewel de New Left de aanwezige spanning tussen radicalisme en gematigdheid, het belang van strijd en de balans tussen extremen, in Gays denken vaak gessimplificeerde, werd duidelijk dat de historicus zelf moeite had om tijdens de protesten te voldoen aan zijn ideaalbeeld van de intellectueel die zijn kritische distantie behoudt.
De tegenstelling tussen Gay en de New Left kwam tot uiting in hun verschillende interpretaties van het belang van Weimars intellectuele erfenis. Zijn boek *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (1968) kan geïnterpreteerd worden als een reactie op een breed gedragen identificatie met de strijd van linkse Weimar intellectuelen tegen de autoritaire staat. Tegelijkertijd was zijn reconstructie van Weimars cultuur een kritiek op het anti-intellectualisme dat hij ten grondslag zag aan het radicalisme van de Amerikaanse protesten. In zijn boek verwees hij Weimar intellectuelen hun gebrek aan politiek realisme, maar hij ging in tegen visies die een relatie leggen tussen de hele Weimarcultuur en het Derde Rijk. In plaats daarvan benadrukte hij haar wortels in het einde van de negentiende eeuw. Deze periode met zijn culturele verworvenheden én zijn politieke imperialisme kon, meer dan Weimars polarisatie, het heden tot voorbeeld zijn. Daarnaast werd zijn reconstructie in grote mate bepaald door die liberale elementen van de Weimarcultuur die door de emigranten naar de Verenigde Staten werden gebracht, zoals Bauhaus en psychoanalyse, waardoor hij Weimar met Amerikaanse liberalisme verbond. In de jaren ’70 ging Gay zich daadwerkelijk op een onderzoek naar de negentiende-eeuwse bourgeoisie richten.


Het laatste hoofdstuk, “History and Memory”, onderzoekt de relatie tussen Gays eigen herinnering aan het Derde Rijk en zijn geschiedschrijving. Getoond wordt dat zijn herinnering als geassimilleerde jood in Nazi-Duitsland en zijn ervaring van emigratie zijn werk diep beïnvloedden. Zijn ontsnapping aan de Nazis en integratie in de Amerikaanse cultuur droegen bij aan de nadruk in zijn onderzoek, geïnformeerde door zijn eigen ervaringen met nationalsocialisme, op intellectuele en

Zijn behoefte aan een constructieve Duitse identiteit die niet volledig bepaald werd door antisemitisme, was in zijn optiek niet in tegenspraak met de historische werkelijkheid, maar stelde hem ook in staat om een complexer beeld van het verleden te reconstrueren dan uit de discussies onder historici vaak naar voren kwam.

In de jaren ’70 stimuleerde Gays recente ervaringen met Duitsers zijn verdediging van de Duits-Joodse symbiosis. Eerder had hij de joodse dimensie in zijn werk vaak verwaarloosd. Maar door zijn toenadering tot Duitsland en de Duitsers kon hij nu meer continuïteit zien tussen zijn verdediging van de liberale traditie en de Duits-joodse *Bildung* traditie. In plaats van een definiëring van een “joodse” identiteit rechtvaardigde hij de Duits-joodse symbiosis wederom door zijn functie in het heden: de Duitse acceptatie van de joodse “outsider” bevorderde de integratie van Duitsland in Europa. Terwijl zijn reconstructie van de Duitse cultuur in *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* beperkt was tot de periode tot 1933, maakte zijn vriendschap met zijn vaders vroegere vriend Emil Busse en
zijn psychoanalytische opleiding de integratie van zijn ervaringen in het Derde Rijk in zijn Duits-Amerikaanse identiteit mogelijk. Zijn psychoanalytische benadering kon de soms al te rigide rationaliteit van zijn Duits-joodse achtergrond belichten, zonder dat deze afdeed aan de Duitse misdaden in zijn memoires My German Question (1998). Maar zijn psychoanalytische benadering nuanceerde tevens de tegenstelling tussen daders en slachtoffers. Ondanks dat hij in het Derde Rijk kind was, creëerde deze benadering een nieuw idee van morele verantwoordelijkheid die landsgrenzen en tijd oversteeg, en zich uitstrekte tot zijn eigen percepties en vooroordelen in exil. Gays verworven inzicht in de historische complexiteit van zijn ervaringen in het Derde Rijk leidden tot een nieuw besef van individualiteit, die vaak ondergesneeuwd was in de polarisatie rond de joods-Duitse geschiedenis. In zijn denken vormden het verleden en de individuele herinnering daarom geen absolute tegenstelling, maar konden elkaar ook versterken. Terwijl de herinnering kon bijdragen aan een beter beeld van het verleden, kon geschiedschrijving ook helpen om de individuele “herinnering” te reconstrueren.

In plaats van een nadruk op een continuïteit met Weimars intellectuele tradities of Koude Oorlog-politiek, laat deze dissertatie zien dat Gays historische werk een proces van actieve herdefiniëring van zijn positie als joodse Duits-Amerikaanse historicus belichaamd. Dit inzicht wortelt in drie centrale conclusies, die ook de dynamiek in zijn idee van westere cultuur toont: tussen “Duitsland” en de “Verenigde Staten,” “idee” en “ideologie” en “trauma” en “heruitvinding”. Ten eerste beïnvloedden zijn ervaringen als emigrant van de tweede generatie zijn idee van westere cultuur. Hoewel wetenschappers zijn Amerikaanse ervaringen vaak genegeerd hebben, leidde zijn emigratie, die relatief vroeg in zijn leven plaatsvond, ertoe dat die bepalend waren voor de ontwikkeling van zijn carrière als historicus. Zijn ervaring van emigratie versterkte de specifieke interactie tussen zijn beeld van Duitse en Amerikaanse cultuur: zijn geworteldheid in de Amerikaanse cultuur vormde een breuk met zijn Duitse achtergrond, maar maakte het ook mogelijk dat hij de Duitse traditie van Geistesgeschichte met een links-liberale identiteit kon verbinden.

Ten tweede hielpen Duitse intellectuele tradities en Gays interpretatie van de “lessen” van de opkomst van het nationaalsocialisme hem bij zijn streven om het vaak controversiële idee van een trans-Atlantische westere cultuur nieuw leven in te blazen. Dit dialectische denken is vaak niet
erkend in de receptie van zijn werk. Zijn ontwikkeling van de historistische spanning tussen universalisme en particularisme, met zijn nadruk op de irrationele factor van het verleden, maakte zijn constructie van de van Europese geschiedenis als spiegel en als tegenpool relevant voor naoorlogse Amerikaanse intellectuelen. Aan het begin van de Koude oorlog, toen het nut van geschiedschrijving vaak werd betwijfeld, bood zijn werk een historische context bij het debat over westerse cultuur in de Verenigde Staten. Het herinnerde intellectuelen eraan dat de westerse cultuur een conflict tussen de Europees-Amerikaanse cultuur representeerde, dat ook constructief kon zijn in zijn voortdurende strijd om de idealen van vrijheid, tolerantie en rationaliteit te definiëren. Weliswaar beperkte Gays verdediging van Amerikaans liberalisme zijn visie op het verleden in sommige opzichten, wat bijvoorbeeld tot uiting kwam in de jaren ’60. Maar het is zijn verdienste dat hij na de oorlog het idee van westerse cultuur uitbreidde met Duitse intellectuele tradities en onderzoek naar de irrationele dimensie van het verleden. Zijn bewuste historisering van zijn werd door zijn ontwikkeling van een eigen “stijl” had tot doel om de constructie van een nieuwe liberale mythe te voorkomen.

Ten derde werd Gays idee van westerse cultuur in sterke mate bepaald door de herinnering aan zijn ervaringen als geassimileerde jood in het Derde Rijk. De relatie tussen zijn herinnering en zijn geschiedschrijving was niet uitsluitend gedefinieerd door zijn trauma of onderdrukking van zijn ervaring met nationaalsocialisme. In plaats daarvan reflecteert zijn werk de spanning tussen deze ervaringen en zijn ontsnapping naar de Verenigde Staten, trauma en heruitvinding. Deze dynamiek lag tevens ten grondslag aan zijn constructie van een westerse identiteit in zijn historische werk, dat de nauwe blik van historici op de Duitse geschiedenis wilde verruimen. In deze zin heeft zijn dialectische denken een bevrijdende functie, die de openheid van het verleden benadrukt.